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Queen of muckrakers : Jessica Mitford's contributions to American journalism

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QUEEN OF MUCKRAKERS:
JESSICA MITFORD'S CONTRIBUTIONS TO AMERICAN JOURNALISM

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ABSTRACT

QUEEN OF MUCKRAKERS:
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by Laura McCreery

This study analyzes the career of Jessica Mitford, author of *The American Way of Death* and other prominent works of investigative journalism. Using historical research and interviews, the thesis examines the significance of Mitford's writing and her accomplishments as a journalist, activist, and social commentator.

In more than 35 years of writing books and articles, the English-born Mitford established herself as an unusual voice on the American scene. Her investigative journalism and political activism had a significant impact on American social institutions, particularly during the Cold War. Mitford's self-styled brand of muckraking journalism emphasizes both exposure of social problems and open advocacy for particular views on such topics as funerals, prisons, and the First Amendment. Although she shares a philosophy of reform with the muckrakers, the crusading Progressive-era journalists after whom she is nicknamed "Queen of Muckrakers," she has little in common with other journalists, past or present.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

> I first began to think of myself as a muckraker when *Time* . . . called me "Queen of the Muckrakers." I rushed to the dictionary to find out what I was queen of, and discovered that "muckraker" was originally a pejorative coined by President Theodore Roosevelt to describe journalists like Lincoln Steffens and Ida Tarbell, who in his view had gone too far in exposing corruption in government and corporate enterprise. Thus the Oxford English dictionary says "muckrake . . . is often made to refer generally . . . to a depraved interest in what is morally 'unsavory' or scandalous." (I fear that does rather describe me.)
>
> Jessica Mitford (*Poison Penmanship: The Gentle Art of Muckraking*, 1979)

Chapter I

Introduction

This analytical study explores the career of Jessica Mitford, a writer, social activist, and public personality whose contributions to American journalism have spanned more than 35 years. Called "Queen of Muckrakers" by *Time* magazine in 1970, the English-born Mitford, now 77, long ago established herself as an unusual voice on the American scene.

The impact of that voice and of Mitford's work have dimmed with time, yet she can claim a substantial body of work, including nine books, and a place in the history of American social and political life. Although scholarly references to her work are few, Mitford and her muckraking journalism have

been the subject of or mentioned in hundreds of mainstream articles: book reviews, profiles, and a variety of pieces about politics and social issues. As a journalist observing society and as a personality of interest to other journalists, Mitford offers many contrasts as a subject.

Many attempts to compare Mitford to other contemporary journalists do not hold up under scrutiny. Although she is in many ways one of them, she differs from most other journalists in background, training, and methods. In addition, her own experience of working as a journalist appears to have differed significantly from the experiences of others.

Mitford's topics and methods have at times been controversial. She claims to have no use for objectivity, and indeed her style of writing and personal activism is strongly subjective. Yet she has worked hard throughout her career to assure that her writing is accurate, and she has never faced a legal challenge to anything she has published. Thus, her varied contributions to American journalism remain unlike the contributions of others, regardless of critical merit.

Mitford's themes as a writer have been less political than her themes as an activist, yet her writing has not shied away from a consistent and unapologetic championing of the rights of the average citizen. Mitford's work displays a direct connection to the traditional libertarian view that the main function of society is to fulfill the needs of its individuals, and not the other way around. Mitford views her journalistic role as one of advocate, more so than many journalists, in a way that is reminiscent of Peterson's social responsibility theory of the press, with its emphasis on the journalist's role as critic (Siebert, Peterson, & Schramm, 1956).

Thus, in many ways the muckraker title fits Jessica Mitford surprisingly well, considering it was bestowed so fleetingly in a magazine headline. Yet Mitford's devotion to the stylistic use of contrast and to the personal practice of irreverence, in her work as in her life, set her apart from other muckrakers of the past and present.

Need for Studies of Independent Journalists

The mass media sections of bookstores and libraries contain many biographical works about formal media institutions and the individuals who built and shaped them. This thesis differs from those organizational views by focusing on an individual whose contributions to journalism and American society have been recognized as substantial but who has always worked independently of organizational definition or control. Although Jessica Mitford's writings have been published regularly in the mainstream press, she was never employed by any media institution. Thus, this study illuminates an independent view of American life and institutions over many years. Only by studying and recording independent views can researchers render them historically significant.

As in many fields, it is the case in journalism that studies of men far outnumber those of women, owing in part to the greater participation of men in the profession over many years. Studies such as this one restore women to history and help to document their experiences and the views they communicated through journalism.

Rationale for Research on Jessica Mitford

The rationale for studying Jessica Mitford has several elements. First, she has established herself as writer of note who will be of interest to future generations of journalists and activists. Second, although Mitford and others have recorded and analyzed many events of her life, such a study of her career has not been done before and was therefore overdue. Finally, Mitford was interested in participating in this project and agreed to a series of interviews, which provided new primary source material not obtainable elsewhere.

This paper summarizes, distills, and interprets aspects of Mitford's career. It attempts to identify recurring patterns and symbols and to investigate what Pauly (1991) called "the making of meaning" (p. 11) by one individual as communicated to a larger society. It cannot presume to define or explain the reasons for Mitford's actions.

Several central questions guided this research: What is the journalistic and historical significance of Jessica Mitford's career as a writer and as an activist? What is her relationship to the Progressive-era muckraking tradition with which she is so strongly identified? How have other journalists viewed the impact of her work and her promotion of modern investigative reporting? What is her legacy?

Mitford has chronicled her own life extensively, having written two volumes of autobiography. These works, *Daughters and Rebels* (1960) and *A Fine Old Conflict* (1977), covered the early and middle periods of her life, viewed from England and from the United States, and the history of her years in the Communist Party in the forties and fifties.

After publishing *Daughters and Rebels*, Mitford emerged on the journalism scene with the publication of her second book, *The American Way of Death* (1963). A scathing indictment of the American funeral industry, the book quickly established her as a formidable investigative journalist in the minds of the American public.

Five of Jessica Mitford's nine books can be said to fit within the muckraking tradition. After *The American Way of Death* in 1963, she followed with *The Trial of Dr. Spock* (1969b), *Kind and Usual Punishment: The Prison Business* (1973b), *Poison Penmanship: The Gentle Art of Muckraking* (1979), and *The American Way of Birth* (1992). In addition to the two volumes of autobiography, she also has published a memoir, *Faces of Philip: A Memoir of Philip Toynbee* (1984), and a historical biography, *Grace Had an English Heart* (1988b).

As for other print media, Mitford published her first article in *The Nation* in 1957 ("Trial by Headline," reprinted in Mitford, 1979), and her subsequent writings appeared in dozens of magazines, including *Life, Esquire, McCall's,* and the *Atlantic.* Many San Francisco Bay Area and national newspapers have carried articles by and about her over the years and still do today. In addition, her work has received much popular and critical attention from the British press throughout her career.

Mitford's work in investigative journalism has been recorded in two film documentaries, one British and one American, and she has appeared in many television talk shows over the years. She also is the subject of a doctoral dissertation in the field of psychology (Fursland, 1990). That study of her mid-life period provided useful background for the present research. In

several taped interviews conducted in 1989, Fursland collected primary accounts suitable for comparison to other interviews and written documentation of various issues and themes.

Chapter II

Methods

This study applied historical and other qualitative research methods of mass communication to a study of Jessica Mitford and her career. The primary method of gathering information was a series of interviews with Mitford and with others who know her, including journalism educators who have called upon her to lecture in their classes. The interviews, combined with material from personal papers and library research, provided material for a thorough study of the context and significance of her journalistic work and her writing and lecturing career.

As a study of an individual, this research cannot be replicated and cannot be generalized to others. Much of the source material, however, is available to others who wish to make their own interpretations.

Primary Source Interviews

The primary source research for this thesis centered on a series of five recorded interviews with Jessica Mitford, totaling approximately five hours and spanning a period of nearly a year during 1994 and 1995. Most of the interviews took place at Mitford's home in Oakland, California. During this time she suffered a broken wrist while on a trip to England and later a broken ankle in California. One interview after the latter injury took place in the Transitional Rehabilitation Unit of Alta Bates Hospital in Berkeley, California, complete with a string of interruptions by the medical staff (December 4, 1994). In spite of such inconveniences, Mitford proved generous

with her time. She did ask to limit each interview to about one hour, although that limit was stretched on two occasions. She set no limits on subject matter. Her husband, Robert Treuhaft, was present for and joined in on two of her interviews.

The style of interviewing combined elements from the methods of oral history, journalism, and social science research. Oral history interviewing is a biographical technique that chronicles the life histories of individuals via taped interviews. Such interviewing usually records events and memories that might otherwise be lost and attempts to place these events in a historically significant context. Emphasis is placed on carefully guiding the narrator, or interviewee, through events of personal and historical significance, many of which may not have been recorded before in any form.

Interviewing for journalism commonly involves a much briefer time period, often just one session. Such interviews frequently focus on particular and timely topics or incidents, rather than the wide-ranging stories of individual lives. Subjects for journalism interviews often are chosen for their expertise or for their involvement in newsworthy events.

Social science interviewing also is oriented most often to specific topics and to multiple subjects who may share certain characteristics or represent a larger population. Although this research had little in common with social science methods, it did draw on the practice of carefully wording and structuring questions to be clear and free of bias. An attempt was made to avoid the pitfall of bias toward the present in trying to reconstruct the past.

Academic discussions of the strengths and weaknesses of oral methods often address issues of reliability and validity. As Hoffman said (in Dunaway

and Baum, 1984): "Now, while it is conceivable that an oral report might be a true description of an event, its validity cannot really be tested unless it can be measured against some body of evidence" (pp. 69-70). Moss noted: "Crucial to a sound understanding of oral history is that the record produced by an interview should never be confused with the original events" (in Dunaway and Baum, 1984, p. 91). Thus interviewing, like other research methods, relies for its success on careful structuring of inquiry and analysis of data.

Because Mitford's life had already been written about in detail by herself and by others, the various methods of interview were combined and tailored to the project. The longer time frame of these interviews offered a chance to attempt new and more detailed insights than are possible in a single interview. The process of taping several hours of interviews over the course of months yielded different results than those that could be expected from a single interview covering many topics.

The interviews with Mitford were supplemented by separate recorded interviews with her husband, Robert Treuhaft, and with others who know her work in journalism, including Ben H. Bagdikian, dean emeritus of the Graduate School of Journalism at the University of California, Berkeley. Attempts to interview two of Mitford's longtime book editors, William Abrahams and Robert Gottlieb, were unsuccessful.

The range of interviews with Mitford and with others who know her was crucial to achieving triangulation, or reviewing ideas about her career with more than one source. In this way, Mitford's thoughts on given issues could be compared to her own writings about the same issues and to the recollections of others who shared her experiences.

To avoid repetition of earlier work, and to account for Mitford's vast experience in being interviewed for other purposes, it was necessary to alter the interview methods over the course of the series. In almost every area of inquiry, Mitford responded in part with stories and anecdotes she had already related in many previous interviews over the years. This repetition may have stemmed naturally, as it would in anyone, from being asked about the same periods of her life many times. It may have stemmed in part from Mitford's experience at controlling an interview, at being the interviewer. Or it may have grown out of Mitford's apparent habit, whether conscious or unconscious, of playing to an audience.

Mitford's own method for interviewing others, charmingly named "kind to cruel" (Mitford, 1979, pp. 12-13), is one in which the interviewer starts with the easy questions, then slips in the tough ones when the subject's guard is down. In Mitford's case, the guard went down only part way, and the defensive position was never maintained for long. When it was suggested that people usually are not successful at putting her on the defensive, Mitford replied: "Oh, really? Oh, good! Well, I'm glad to hear it" (taped interview, February 22, 1995).

Some interviews with others provided more fresh, previously unrecorded insights than did interviews with Mitford, yet her interviews often authenticated what others said. It also proved useful to compare Mitford's original writings on some subjects with her current thoughts on those subjects.

Secondary Sources

In preparation for the thesis, Jessica Mitford's books and articles were studied extensively for more than a year, along with many articles and profiles written about her by others. Other materials consulted include two documentary films about Mitford, one British (Barnes, 1977) and one American (Evans, Landauer, & Morgan, 1986); videotapes of Mitford's appearances on American and British television shows and her speaking engagements at colleges and libraries; cassette tapes of radio broadcasts and other appearances; references to her in journalism textbooks, books on interviewing, and other books; and the psychological study of Mitford written as a doctoral dissertation (Fursland, 1990).

Resources also included secondary source (non-taped) telephone interviews with Mitford's daughter, Constancia Romilly, her son, Benjamin Treuhaft, a close friend, Marge Frantz, and an interview by mail with Carl Jensen, a journalism professor at Sonoma State University who directs Project Censored, a long-running research project that each year identifies major news stories that were not widely covered in the mainstream press.

Chapter III

Overview of Investigative Journalism

Jessica Mitford's name has become somewhat synonymous with the term *muckraker;* one rarely sees the former without the latter. And although the literature shows that she shares certain characteristics with the journalists of the original muckraking era, commonly described as 1902 through 1912 (e.g., Weinberg & Weinberg, 1961), she really fits no category, either by her own definition or as reflected in the print media.

The existing literature revealed several interesting themes. Many books and articles suggested that Mitford has achieved a high level of journalistic recognition and prominence, but also that she has not consistently been held up for example as a serious investigative writer by other journalists or by scholars.

Mitford's reputation as a muckraker appears to have survived through her personal activities and vivid presence as well as through her journalistic accomplishments. In the popular press, she has been mentioned in the same breath with Jack Anderson, Rachel Carson, Ralph Nader, and other investigative authors who were her contemporaries (e.g., Golden, 1966; Weinberg & Weinberg, 1966). Yet in the academic literature her work did not always get serious recognition comparable to theirs.

For example, Mitford's name is conspicuously absent from Stein's (1975) scholarly review of 10 muckraking books published since World War II, although *The American Way of Death* (1963) was more prominent than several books he reviewed. That choice may reflect a significant academic

view of Mitford, but it could merely indicate Stein's individual view. Perhaps Stein chose authors whose credentials or subject matter met his academic or journalistic criteria, or perhaps it is significant that all 10 books were written by men. Similar articles are few, however, so it remains difficult to make a meaningful interpretation of Mitford's stance in the academic literature on the contemporary muckrakers.

Although Mitford had a number of regular publishers over the years, both for her books and for her articles, she was never employed by any media institution. Once established as a successful freelancer, she could be selective about her topics and her content. Mitford's poison pen was at times in great demand for magazine articles, but she sometimes refused publication offers that were contingent upon changes in content (Mitford, 1979).

Investigative-type reporting has existed in many forms throughout the history of the United States. Before examining modern investigative reporting and Mitford's work, a look at earlier movements, particularly yellow journalism and the muckrakers, can set the scene.

Yellow Journalism

The last few years of the 19th century brought with them the era of yellow journalism. Even today that period is identified almost solely by its most famous turmoil: the competition between newspaper publishers Joseph Pulitzer and William Randolph Hearst to gain readers through sensational accounts of Cuba's struggle for independence, a rivalry widely thought to have involved the United States in the Spanish-American war (Milton, 1989).

This period brought a new, more visible role to reporters, a star status formerly reserved for editors. Although editors were largely responsible for pushing their foreign correspondents to outdo each other with thrilling exploits and journalistic puffery during this period, the story of the yellow kids was more complex than is widely believed, and certainly not all press outlets were so sensational (Milton, 1989).

Although the yellow press was a historical precursor to investigative reporting as it is known today, it offers little to illuminate accepted reporting techniques of the 20th century, which have emphasized the ideal of non-participatory, objective recording of newsworthy events. Yet Hearst's later explanation for his focus on the sensational did much to relate yellow journalism to the watchdog belief system still apparent among American journalists today:

> People are interested in the fundamentals, love, romance, adventure, tragedy, mystery. The world is not all sweetness and light—not all sunshine. There are storms and darkness. There is suffering and death. Whoever paints the world must paint the deep shadows as well as the bright lights. (quoted in Altschull, 1990, p. 266)

The Muckrakers

The period of muckraking, or reform, journalism overlapped somewhat with the yellow kids and picked up where they left off. The rapid expansion of industry, communications, and the economy since the Civil War, fueled by protectionist tariffs and cheap immigrant labor, was taking its toll on American society at the turn of the century. By the time Theodore Roosevelt applied the term *muckraker* to journalists in a speech to the

United States Senate in 1906 (e.g., Regier, 1957; Altschull, 1990; C. Jensen, 1994), reform journalism was a full-blown force bridging the Populist and Progressive political eras.

The new reform journalism played out primarily in popular magazines of the day, such as *McClure's*, *Hampton's*, and *Collier's*. The dozen or so leading muckrakers of the decade were established reporters and writers whose discovery of corruption at many levels of government and business led them, sometimes reluctantly, into their investigative reporting roles (F. Cook, 1972).

The topics covered by the muckrakers included widespread corruption in city and state governments, the business monopoly of John D. Rockefeller and his Standard Oil Company, the health and economic aspects of the meat packing industry, and a massive exposé of the United States Senate. The direct and indirect result of their writings was widespread reform of many American institutions: the breakup of Standard Oil and the era of trust-busting, reform of the meat packing industry and other health reforms, child labor laws, and the popular election of United States senators (F. Cook, 1972).

Although the muckraking era continued for several years beyond 1912, its heyday of force and influence, the so-called Golden Age of Muckraking, had passed (e.g., Weinberg & Weinberg, 1961; C. Jensen, 1994). Many of the muckraking magazines survived, but they turned towards entertainment and away from reform as new individuals and financial powers gained control of them (F. Cook, 1972). As Regier wrote in 1932: "Quite probably the belief that muckraking was no longer needed had something to do with the decline of public interest in exposure . . . but it is wrong to suggest that the muckrakers

ceased their efforts of their own accord because they believed that their work was finished" (1957, p. 206).

Modern Investigative Reporting

There is disagreement in the popular press and the academic community alike on the fate of muckraking journalism: Is it alive and well today or did it disappear 80 years ago? Some scholars asserted that, after its heyday, muckraking journalism enjoyed only a brief resurgence during the Franklin D. Roosevelt era in the 1930s (F. Cook, 1972).

Filler (1968) viewed the muckrakers as a historical reality with some relevance to the present: "There is no question at all of admiring muckraking for muckraking's sake, let alone of hoping to apply 'the lessons of the past' mechanically to the present" (p. 41).

Many authors agreed that the early muckraking era differed from whatever muckraking may have followed. "What does distinguish that decade is the fact that there then existed a muckraking movement, a concerted effort on the part of a large number of writers" (Regier, 1957, p. 194).

Weinberg and Weinberg (1966) agreed. "Muckraking has not disappeared," they wrote in *Saturday Review*. "What is missing today is a concentration of magazines devoted to the 'literature of exposure.' But other media have stepped in to assist, or to take over, the spotlighting of social ills" (p. 54). They added that books have taken over from magazines as the most consistent forum for muckraking journalism. Weinberg and Weinberg briefly mentioned Jessica Mitford and *The American Way of Death*, along with books by Ralph Nader, Rachel Carson, and others. Golden (1966)

mentioned the same books, also in *Saturday Review*, but took a dim view of the type of assessment made by Weinberg and Weinberg: "The old muckraker types are fewer today and have less of an impact because there is much less to criticize" (p. 103).

The *Nation* expressed the view ("Chop," 1969) that the muckraking revival of the 1960s was merely "journalistic karate" (p. 301) aimed at highly visible and controversial individuals rather than at institutions. The article did describe Ralph Nader's efforts as "useful" muckraking (p. 301).

Some academic writers adopted the view that the muckraking phenomenon constantly recreated itself throughout this century through the evolution of its practitioners, its channels of communication, and its audiences (Harrison & Stein, 1973). In his scholarly review of 10 muckraking books of the 1940s through 1970s, Stein (1975) wrote: "Muckraking never ceased in the United States after it declined in national prominence around 1912 or 1914" (p. 297).

In viewing the development of investigative reporting over the years, it is important to note some of the changes in American society that shaped the ever-evolving notion of a watchdog press. The quiet prosperity of the post-World War II years shrouded the eerie march of McCarthyism into every corner of American life, starting in the Truman years. In 1950, Alger Hiss was sentenced for perjury, and passage of the McCarran Act imposed severe restrictions on Communists. Dramatic changes in the world's political balance ensued, while domestic changes came swiftly as well: desegregation, the civil rights movement, and the string of political assassinations that felled the Kennedy brothers and Martin Luther King, Jr. in the sixties.

By the time of the stormy Democratic National Convention in 1968 in Chicago, the nation's consciousness had been swept sharply away from the stable façade of the American dream. In a dramatic peak to events of that year, Richard Nixon's promise to end the Vietnam War edged him into the presidency on the narrowest margin since 1912 (Grun, 1975). His eventual downfall in 1974 over the Watergate affair, precipitated by the investigative reporting of Bob Woodward and Carl Bernstein of the Washington *Post*, unleashed a flood of new interest in watchdog and reform journalism (Altschull, 1990). The nation's journalism schools overflowed as the baby-boomers came of age, although that flush of enthusiasm appeared to recede somewhat during the transition period of the eighties.

Ettema and Glasser (1988) referred to contemporary investigative journalists in relation to "the reformist spirit of their muckraking predecessors" (pp. 11-12). Like the early muckrakers, the highly accomplished contemporary investigative reporters Ettema and Glasser studied were not typically motivated by an "isolated wrong or an individual wrongdoer." Rather, they tended to mention systemwide problems as their concern (p. 12).

Clearly, the exposing of societal ills through the press still flourishes today. And although the term *muckraker* is used most often in its historical sense in the literature, the modern offspring of the muckrakers, such as investigative journalists, are in evidence everywhere, though not perhaps with the cohesiveness apparent in the early part of the century.

Altschull (1990) reviewed nine distinct movements in modern American journalism, saying that each reacted in its own time "against the commonplace press standard of the journalist as mirror, as one who was . . . a

nonparticipant in the 'news,' but rather a figure *through* whom news was presented" (p. 316-317). Altschull's nine were investigative journalism, enterprise journalism, interpretive journalism, new journalism, underground journalism, advocacy journalism, adversary journalism, precision journalism, and celebrity journalism (p. 317-318). Several of these movements shared the goal of objectivity, while others played down or even rejected objectivity as unrealistic or even distasteful. Altschull's list made the point that modern reporting, even investigative reporting, takes many forms and allows for many points of view.

Chapter IV

Jessica Mitford's Path to Journalism

Born into the English aristocracy in 1917, the Honorable Jessica Lucy Mitford was schooled at home and had little contact with the outside world until her teens. The sixth of seven children, all but one of them girls, she decided at a young age to shun the lifestyle represented by her parents, Lord and Lady Redesdale. That lifestyle revolved around the church, the Conservative Party, and the House of Lords, of which her father was a member. At 12, already dreaming of escaping her role as the daughter of a peer, Mitford (known to all as Decca) established a "running away account" with Drummond's Bank (Mitford, 1960). She began to embrace Communism in her early teens, while her sister Unity chose the opposite political side, with strange results in the context of their sheltered family life:

> Once we were left in charge of my mother's produce stall at the Conservative Fete. "Look at all this money!" I said to Boud [Unity]. "It does seem a shame to think of the beastly old Conservatives getting it all. I think I'll send about £5 of it to the *Daily Worker* for their fund drive." Boud insisted that she was going to take, shilling for shilling, an equal amount for the British Union of Fascists. There wasn't much time for argument about it as my mother was expected back any minute; quickly we pocketed £5 apiece, which we dispatched that night to the respective offices. I have often wondered since what the *Daily Worker* people must have thought when they read the note accompanying the contribution: "£5 donation from the Annual Conservative Fete of Oxfordshire." (Mitford, 1960, p. 69)

Although Mitford had limited access in her early years to people and events outside her family, she did have available a wide variety of reading material representing many views, which she devoured on her own:

> My parents subscribed, across the board, to quite a few papers, certainly the *Times* and a thing called the *Morning Post*, which is now defunct—these are the Tory papers of the day—but they also got the *Daily Express*, which is a kind of yellow press operation, and innumerable weeklies, as I remember—*Punch*, and the *New Statesman and Nation*, which was a very left-wing paper. And there was a thing called the *Weekend Review*, when I was a child . . . .Those are the things that we used to read. (Mitford, taped interview, November 1, 1994)

After watching her eldest sister, Nancy Mitford, launch a writing career with a first novel in 1931, Mitford tried her own hand at writing a novel at age 16, thinking that "the idea that one could make money out of writing a book was rather thrilling" (Mitford, taped interview by Fursland, June 8, 1989). But the result was such a personal disappointment that Mitford destroyed it:

> All I can remember about it was that it was simply so bad, and it was so obviously completely autobiographical. It was all about a sad girl who had a boring life in the Cotswolds . . . .And I read it again two years later—horrid. . . . I threw it away, burned it up. . . . I didn't like it. . . . I remember Nancy said that a novel had to be at least 60,000 words . . . so I kept writing until it got to be 60,000 words. (Mitford, taped interview, November 1, 1994)

Nancy appears to have provided some influence in the political realm as well as the literary: "Nancy was sort of left wing, you know. She was a member of the Labour—well, not a member, but a supporter of the Labour Party" (Mitford, taped interview, November 1, 1994).

While still in her late teens, not long after her official debut in London society, Mitford fulfilled her dream of running away by joining forces with Esmond Romilly, a nephew of Sir Winston Churchill who had left

Wellington College after controversy surrounding his anti-fascist publications and activities (Ingram, 1985). Before they met, Mitford was familiar with the young Romilly's views through several books he wrote while still in his teens and through newspaper coverage of his activities (Mitford, taped interview, November 1, 1994). As their close friend Philip Toynbee later recalled:

> Decca Mitford was the younger sister of two formidable women who, at this time, were shocking and entertaining the newspaper public by their fascist views and behavior. She herself had already declared herself a political extremist, though her extremism was in the opposite direction from her sisters'. She was a very pretty, incautious and enthusiastic girl, and within twenty-four hours of their first meeting, she and Esmond had decided to elope together. (Toynbee, 1980, p. 98)

The pair headed for Spain, where Romilly had secured a job as a reporter for the Loyalist cause. Upon discovering Mitford's whereabouts, her father dispatched a British destroyer to retrieve her. That effort failed, and Mitford and Romilly were married in 1937 in France. These events marked the start of Mitford's years-long rift with her family. Her father never forgave her, and she never saw him again.

After returning to England later that year, the Romillys settled in London's East End, where Esmond joined the local Labour Party and they enjoyed the constant company of friends. Philip Toynbee stayed with them for a time and later wrote of frequent arguments he had with them about their preference for the stance of the Labour Party and his for the Communist Party:

> In argument [the Romillys] were inseparable, although it was always my object to persuade Decca that on some points Esmond might be wrong. She was his vociferous ally and supporter in every one of his views. For this was in many ways an old-fashioned marriage, in which both partners clearly recognised their well-defined functions. It was for Esmond to establish their views and decide on their actions—for Decca to cheer him on and to look after the house. (1980, p. 115)

Mitford's recent recollections confirmed Philip Toynbee's specific observations about her marriage to Romilly. Asked if that marriage could be described as traditional, she replied:

> Very much so. I think that's a point that Philip Toynbee made, very much, in *Friends Apart*, that [Romilly] was the sort of leader of it, you know, and the head of the household, so to speak, although there was never any household to be head of! And that I was the follower. That was very, very true. (taped interview, November 1, 1994)

The couple emigrated to the United States in 1939, living in New York and then Miami. When the war loomed, Esmond Romilly joined the Canadian Air Force to further his personal campaign against fascism. Mitford, then pregnant, remained in America. Less than a year after the birth of their daughter, Constancia, Esmond Romilly was killed in action at the age of 23 while flying over the Atlantic in November 1941 (Mitford, 1960).

As has been reported in detail in Mitford's books and in other books and articles about her family, Mitford's sisters also led unusual and public lives: Nancy, a prominent novelist; Diana, the wife of a British fascist leader; Unity, a member of Hitler's inner circle during his rise to power; Deborah, the Duchess of Devonshire. Only Pam, who managed a farm, remained less visible. Their only brother, Tom, was killed in action in World War II (Guinness & Guinness, 1985).

Daughters and Rebels

Mitford's entire childhood and early adult life up to this point were chronicled in detail in the first installment of her autobiography, *Daughters and Rebels* (1960). Although the book had no direct bearing on her later forays into investigative journalism, it provides important insights into her belief system and her reasons for taking up various causes, both in her personal life and through her writing.

Newsweek (1960) wrote: "This autobiography has been a recent English sensation, and with good reason. It is a flashing, funny, and poignant work by the fifth of six conspicuous daughters of one of the most bizarre families in modern British history" ("Those Bizarre Sisters").

Edelman (1960) wrote in his review of *Daughters and Rebels* that neither Mitford nor Romilly was deliberately the sort of "cushioned rebel who can always rely on Daddy or Mummy in an emergency" (p. 32). Yet the experiences of both, Edelman maintained, were "in some measure those of privileged people" (p. 33). The same theme appears near the end of *Daughters and Rebels*: "We regarded ourselves as 'self-made,' free agents in every respect, the products of our own actions and decisions. Yet our style of behavior . . . [is] not hard to trace to an English upper class ancestry and upbringing" (Mitford, 1960, p. 280).

The theme of being brought up in the privileged class and then rebelling against it also appeared often among the American muckrakers of the early 20th century. For example, F. Cook (1972) wrote of Josiah Flynt: "Like many of the other muckrakers, he was a child of wealth and secure

social position" (p. 23) and of Upton Sinclair: "Like many of the other muckrakers, he came from an upper-class American family" (p. 97).

In Mitford's case, forswearing privilege was an anthem. The fact that her privilege was so great to begin with (Mitford, 1960) and that she elected to swing fully in the direction of Communism (Mitford, 1977) made her story far different from those of the early American muckrakers. During her early years in the United States, she sought anonymity and refuge from the press. But true to her early station in life, she eventually became resigned to and even appeared to relish the attention lavished on her by the American and British media.

After Romilly's untimely death, Mitford worked until 1943 in the Washington, DC, and San Francisco offices of the federal Office of Price Administration (Mitford, 1977). While still employed in Washington, she and her daughter continued to live with the family of Virginia and Clifford Durr in Seminary Hill, Virginia. As Virginia Durr (1985) remembered:

> Decca was being spied on all the time [by the British Embassy]. We didn't know about that until after the war was over. . . . You see, Decca's husband had fought in Spain and her sister had been a friend of Hitler. Decca was very outspoken and was at that time working for John Kenneth Galbraith at the Office of Price Administration. . . . Decca's family kept begging her to come home to England, but she wouldn't. (pp. 147-148)

Struggling to rebuild her life, Mitford asked for a transfer to the San Francisco office of the OPA, though she knew no one on the West Coast. Once there, she soon had a visit from Robert Treuhaft, an attorney with whom she had become friends at the Washington OPA (Mitford, 1977). The

couple married in June 1943 and added two sons to their family, settling first in San Francisco and then in Oakland, California, where they still live today. Treuhaft's quiet, thoughtful style and dry wit make him a complement to Mitford, and she to him.

Throughout their lives together, the two have been involved in a variety of civil rights, political, and labor causes. Mitford served as executive secretary of the local Civil Rights Congress from 1949 until it folded in 1956, while Treuhaft, the CRC's general counsel, devoted his labor law practice to representing the poor and disenfranchised. Both Mitford and Treuhaft joined the Communist Party and were active in it for many years (Mitford, 1977). But they quit in the late 1950s, in one interviewer's words: "after deciding the party had become arteriosclerotic, irrelevant and—perhaps its greatest sin—boring" (Carroll, 1992, p. D4).

Mitford's break with her own family came to a head in 1958 with the death of her father, who cut her out of his will, and therefore the family fortune, without a penny. As always with the Mitfords, British and American headlines blared the news (Mitford, 1977).

Thus, whatever the causes of Jessica Mitford's choices in life, neither she nor her work can be considered fully and accurately outside the context of her upbringing and her famous family. Although Mitford long ago left behind her English way of living, and although she has been an American citizen for over 50 years, she still comes across as thoroughly English. "She's gotten more and more English over the years," her daughter Constancia Romilly said, noting that Mitford long ago gave up her early attempts to blend in with other Americans (personal communication, April 9, 1995).

The American Way of Death

Jessica Mitford's turn to journalism in the early 1960s was at first incidental to the activities of her husband, Robert Treuhaft. In the course of his law practice, Treuhaft was appalled at seeing bereaved families using up their union death benefits to pay the high costs of funerals. Treuhaft became involved in a movement to provide citizens with an alternative to high-priced funerals and burials. As a founder of what is now the Bay Area Funeral Society, he advocated cremation and simple, reasonably priced funeral ceremonies for all who wanted them (Mitford, 1977).

It was Treuhaft who encouraged Mitford to begin detailed research on the funeral industry and who suggested that her findings eventually take the form of a book. In the introduction to *The American Way of Death,* Mitford credited him with all but the actual writing, saying the book could well be bylined "by Robert Treuhaft, as told to Jessica Mitford" (Mitford, 1963, p. 11). In fact, Treuhaft did take a leave from his law practice to work on the project (Mitford, 1977).

Nevertheless, Mitford herself also did serious and detailed research on the book over several years, and her fascination with the subject only grew as time went on. Throughout the book she described how she obtained bootleg copies of *Casket and Sunnyside* and other funeral trade publications and how she made phone calls and personal visits to funeral homes and cemeteries to supplement her research.

Pretending to make preliminary arrangements for a dying aunt, for example, Mitford got on the phone and tested a local undertaker's knowledge of California law, which required no coffin for cremation (Mitford, 1963):

> The family would want something very simple, I went on, just cremation. Of course, we can arrange all that, I was assured. And since we want only cremation, and there will be no service, we should prefer not to buy a coffin. The undertaker's voice at the other end of the phone was now alert, although smooth. He told me, calmly and authoritatively, that it would be "illegal" for him to enter into such an arrangement. "You mean, it would be against the law?" I asked. Yes, indeed. "In that case, perhaps we could take the body straight to the crematorium in our station wagon?" A shocked silence, followed by an explosive outburst: "Madam, the average lady has neither the facilities nor the inclination to be hauling dead bodies around!" (Which was actually a good point, I thought.) (pp. 30-31)

Even with its use of humor, the book was a serious and shocking indictment of an empire built at the expense of people mourning their loved ones. *The American Way of Death* was a combination of meticulous preparation and good timing, a feat of popular success and mass impact Mitford never repeated. It stayed on the bestseller list for more than a year, selling 200,000 copies in hardback and 500,000 in paper (Carroll, 1992). As she said later: "The funeral industry has always been a tremendous bonanza for me, and as it was something nobody had looked at before, it made it terribly easy for me to go straight to the head of the class" (Dean, 1982, p. 23).

The chapter describing the embalming process in detail was a particular feat of writing skill, as Mitford had to describe gory details of a process she herself never witnessed:

> To return to Mr. Jones, the blood is drained out through the veins and replaced by embalming fluid pumped in through the arteries. As noted in *The Principles and Practices of Embalming*, "every operator has a favorite injection and drainage point". . . . There are various choices of embalming fluid. If Flextone is used, it will produce a "mild, flexible

> rigidity. The skin retains a velvety softness, the tissues are rubbery and pliable. Ideal for women and children." (1963, p. 70)

As Robert Treuhaft remembers, prospective publishers balked at the graphic detail, though it was cleverly handled:

> That's the chapter on which the book almost foundered, because both the English and American publishers, who had given her contracts, withdrew and said they would not publish with that chapter in the book. . . . That chapter was never rewritten for the publishers. It . . . was done in her incomparable, light, witty style. . . . And the result has been that there have been dozens of textbooks on writing . . . that have asked for permission to reprint some of her material . . . and by far the most frequently used chapter is that chapter on embalming—always used as an example of how to handle a difficult subject with skill. (taped interview, February 22, 1995)

The book's presence in the American consciousness in 1963 was poignantly recalled 15 years later in a biography of Robert F. Kennedy. In the hours after his brother's assassination, Kennedy was faced suddenly with decisions about the funeral. The scene and his thoughts were recorded as follows (Schlesinger, Jr., 1978):

> They went to Bethesda Hospital. There were so many details. The funeral home wanted to know how grand the coffin should be. "I was influenced by . . . that girl's book on [burial] expenses . . . Jessica Mitford [*The American Way of Death*]. . . . I remember making the decision based on Jessica Mitford's book. . . . I remember thinking about it afterward, about whether I was cheap or what I was, and I remembered thinking about how difficult it must be for everybody making that kind of decision." (p. 658)

The book did help to change the way Americans thought about death and funerals. Mitford said cremations accounted for just 3.5 percent of all American burials in 1963. "Today, [the incidence of cremation] has gone up to

20 percent" nationwide, Mitford said recently, citing the trade publication *Mortuary Management* (taped interview, December 4, 1994).

Mitford was roundly criticized in the funeral trade publications at the time, but the popular press response was overwhelmingly positive. Said one reviewer: "She has documented her book with facts, and treats a dismal subject tastefully—yet often with hilarity, though she's never too flippant. Largely she lets the funeral industry insert its own satiric rapier" (Brayman, 1963, p. 14).

Perhaps an even greater measure of the book's impact is the fact that it later prompted the Federal Trade Commission to establish funeral industry standards where none had existed before. "There is no question that *The American Way of Death* was a significant factor in getting the commission moving," said then-FTC commissioner Patricia Bailey in a documentary film (Evans, et al., 1986). Mitford's colorful appearance at FTC hearings in 1976 resulted in an even greater awareness of funeral industry costs in the minds of the American public and demonstrated the strong policy impact brought about by her first foray into investigative journalism.

On a personal note, the book represented to Mitford the first real change from being known only as a Mitford girl. As she recalled: "*The American Way of Death* put me on the map as myself, and not a Mitford sister. Now that, to me, was important" (taped interview, November 1, 1994).

The Trial of Dr. Spock

In the waning days of the sixties, Mitford published her next muckraking book, *The Trial of Dr. Spock, The Rev. William Sloane Coffin,*

Jr., Michael Ferber, Mitchell Goodman, and Marcus Raskin (1969b). It, too, had the appeal of timeliness, involving as it did the issue of United States participation in the Vietnam War. The book was Mitford's firsthand account of the 1968 trial of the "Boston Five" on charges of conspiracy to "counsel, aid and abet" violations of the Selective Service Law. She wrote that all five were involved in individual antiwar activities, but that they barely knew one another prior to the trial. All five first learned of their indictments from the press. All but Raskin were found guilty of conspiracy charges.

The press response to the book included a predictable amount of taking of political sides. The *National Review* ("No Reactionary He," 1969) delighted in mentioning Mitford's "political leanings" (p. 1054) in a short piece appearing separately from its review of the book.

> Her interest in civil rights is an interest which, over the years, she has primarily expressed in behalf of people who desire to use their civil rights to further Communist interests. . . . She served for years as secretary of the Civil Rights Congress. . . . As anybody whose concern for civil rights is general rather than particular can tell you . . . [it is] a Communist operation; ask the Attorney General's Office, which so labeled it years ago. (p. 1054)

By the time such attacks appeared, Mitford's book had already made an impact. As an excerpt from the forthcoming book (Mitford, 1969a) was being printed in the August 1969 issue of the *Atlantic*, a federal appellate court had reversed the conspiracy convictions, saying the judge had improperly instructed the jury. The judge's error had been described in Mitford's book (Current Biography Yearbook, 1974).

A review in *Science and Society* (Sobell, 1970) placed the book firmly in the muckraking tradition, saying it could have been called *The American Way of Death, Volume II*:

> In each of the two books, Miss Mitford deals with a cancerous institution firmly implanted in our community consciousness. The use of conspiracy law in political cases is as mendacious a bill of goods as the one sold to grieving families seeking to bury their dead. . . . [Mitford's] contribution lies not only in her elucidation of the Spock trial procedures, nor even in her description of the defendants themselves, their attorneys, and of the 85-year-old judge so eagerly helping the prosecutors. It lies rather in the way she reveals the confrontation between moral human beings and a petrified judicial institution. (pp. 497-498)

A reviewer for *Western Political Quarterly* (Wormuth, 1970) demonstrated sympathy for the defendants, but he described a very different book:

> Miss Mitford has written a chatty journalistic account of the trial. There are lively pictures of the defendants, counsel on both sides, the judge and the bailiff. She gives an adequate report of the testimony and the course of the trial. . . . The narrative is brisk and cheerful, and highly sympathetic to the defendants. The legal issues are described with more indignation than penetration. (p. 412)

Although the book was published promptly after the trial, the controversy had all but blown over by the time it appeared. "The book hardly sold at all, I don't think . . . in the first place, I think [the defendants] were all either acquitted or being acquitted on appeal by the time the book came out, so the issue was moot" Mitford recalled recently. Sales were poor, and it soon went out of print (Mitford, taped interviews, December 4, 1994; February 19, 1995).

The Famous Writers School

Mitford's next major article is remembered by many individuals as one of the most effective pieces of her career (e.g., Bagdikian, 1994). In "Let Us Now Appraise Famous Writers" (Mitford, 1979), which first appeared in the *Atlantic* in July 1970, Mitford took a vicious dig at the Famous Writers School, a heavily advertised mail-order writing school in Westport, Connecticut, whose Guiding Faculty of 15 included the literary likes of Bennett Cerf, Faith Baldwin, and Phyllis McGinley. At the time, the school had approximately 65,000 students, each paying up to $900 for a three-year course that in reality had no participation from the Guiding Faculty.

"Anyone with common sense would know that the fifteen of us are much too busy to read the manuscripts the students send in," Faith Baldwin told Mitford (p. 153). "Mail order selling . . . [is] an appeal to the gullible," added Bennett Cerf (p. 156). Fallout from the original article included letters to *Atlantic* editors, many followup articles, even political cartoons. The Famous Writers School folded in 1972.

That article prompted *Time* (1970, July 20) to crown Mitford "Queen of Muckrakers." The label, once given, held fast. Mitford later referred to it in the subtitle of her book *Poison Penmanship*, although she seemed now and then to have misgivings about its repeated attachment to her name. "It's a horrid word," she once told an interviewer (Dean, 1982).

Kind and Usual Punishment

Jessica Mitford's next book to apply muckraking techniques to a major social institution was *Kind and Usual Punishment: The Prison Business*

(1973b). The book exposed widespread problems in the American prison system, systematically denouncing California's indeterminate sentence, the inmate welfare fund, the treatment of prisoners, the work furlough system, and the parole board system. Although solving the problems of prisons was beyond the book's scope, it repeatedly planted the startling idea that the United States should abolish the existing system over time. "The only healthy thing that goes on in prison is rebellion," Mitford said in an interview (Gardner, 1973, p. 32).

The British magazine *Punch* cheered Mitford's latest exposé: "Prison is a deterrent. Like hell! The enormous percentage of recidivists shows that prison is anything but a deterrent. . . . Please read this book" (Adler, 1975, p. 952).

Mitford's book was just one of many that appeared on the subject of American prison reform during the seventies. Other journalists, including Ben H. Bagdikian, Wendell Rawls, Jr., Tom Wicker, and Min S. Yee, exposed massive problems in their prison books and made a collective case, directly and indirectly, for reforming the American system.

Many events of the sixties had helped to shape the radical prison reform movement of the seventies, which was carried out largely by newly empowered prisoners. Black Muslim convicts already had won the legal right to practice their religion while incarcerated, and prisoners who formerly regarded themselves as helpless victims began to question the whole prison system and its place in society, often viewing it as a systematic method of class and race oppression. During the same period, pure punishment was being

replaced by behavioral rehabilitation as the guiding principle of corrections work (Mitford, 1973b).

The radical prison movement began in earnest with the death of the Soledad brothers in 1970, of George Jackson in 1971, and with the uprising at the federal prison in Attica, New York, that same year. Mitford's hard-won prison interview with Jackson appeared in the *New York Times Book Review* in June 1971, just months before he was gunned down (related in Mitford, 1979).

The complicated arrangements necessary to set up that interview (reprinted in Mitford, 1979) showed both the breadth and depth of her skills. That Jackson agreed to meet with her now seems remarkable, a testimony to her stance as a reformer and a journalist.

In 1972, while researching and writing her prison book, Mitford won a prestigious Guggenheim fellowship in support of her work. She already had established her research on prisons by publishing some of her results on the use of behavior modification in California prisons in the *Atlantic* the previous year (Mitford, 1971). At the start of 1973, the *Atlantic* carried a second article by Mitford (1973a) that exposed extensive testing of experimental drugs on federal prisoners around the country, a practice resulting in great monetary gain for pharmaceutical companies. For low sums such as $15 a month, a small fortune in the prison setting, prisoners agreed to so-called voluntary testing that sometimes resulted in serious illness or even death.

Material from both *Atlantic* articles appeared in the finished book. By calling for scaling down and eventually abolishing prisons over time, Mitford

ran afoul of both traditional liberal and traditional conservative thinking on the prison system, a fact not lost on reviewers. *Newsweek* weighed in first among popular magazines: "We need good muckraking reporters like Miss Mitford: people who take a dim view of liberal as well as conservative cant, who distrust virtually any claim that smacks of self-satisfied complacency" (Prescott, 1973, p. 97).

Time magazine likewise praised Mitford's methodical research and reasoned attacks on prison system rhetoric, especially the argument that prisons psychologically rehabilitate sick individuals (Maddocks, 1973). That Mitford won prominent popular reviews was a confirmation of her growing status as an investigator to be taken seriously.

The trade journal *Federal Probation* added to the chorus of praise for *Kind and Usual Punishment,* but added: "At times Miss Mitford appears to be romanticizing convicts" (Rigg, 1974, p. 78). The journal *Science and Society* commended Mitford's work without criticism (B. Cook, 1974).

By the mid-seventies, the fiery prison reform movement waned, and the wave of interest by journalists and the public crested and fell as well. Ben H. Bagdikian laid the blame squarely on the Vietnam War, suggesting it disrupted the dynamics and power of the prison reform movement along with the power and momentum of many other things (taped interview, May 19, 1994).

But *Kind and Usual Punishment* was one of Mitford's most important books, and it had one lasting effect on society. In her words: "The only result of the book that did any good was that a lot of the medical experiments were

stopped after [it came out]. It's still selling. It's the only one of my [early] books that's still in print in America" (taped interview, February 19, 1995).

Poison Penmanship

Mitford's next foray into muckraking journalism in book form was *Poison Penmanship: The Gentle Art of Muckraking* (1979), a wide-ranging compendium of her magazine pieces spanning more than 20 years, including the *Atlantic* article on the Famous Writers School. An important part of her body of work, the book reprinted each previously published article along with Mitford's after-the-fact commentary and critique. The critiques often suggested with characteristic humor and self-deprecation what Mitford should have done differently in the course of researching and writing her articles. The book's introduction is a guide to investigative techniques, called by Carl Bernstein in the afterword "as good a primer on reporting as I've read" (p. 277).

The book's emphasis on investigation (complete with a caricature of Mitford in Sherlock Holmes getup on the back cover) was no accident. Mitford always viewed herself as an investigator first, dating back to her training with the federal Office of Price Administration during World War II and to a brief stint investigating cases for her husband's law firm. The book's list of essential qualities for a successful investigator included "plodding determination, and an appetite for tracking and destroying the enemy" (p. 4).

One reviewer of *Poison Penmanship* described Mitford's enemy as the villains of American enterprise:

> They abound in the sort of people who have made postwar America the land of the lowest common denominator at the highest possible price: glib PR men, television censors, unctuous academics, and midcult Olympians like the Famous Writers. [Mitford's] joy at running such foxes to earth glitters from every page of this collection and even gives a glint of jovial malice to four or five pieces that are really too dated and ephemeral to warrant enshrinement between hard covers. (Pollitt, 1979, p. 28)

Poison Penmanship also emphasized one of Mitford's most important bits of advice: Journalists should stick to topics that interest them personally. In addition to several magazine articles related to *The American Way of Death*, the book included a piece Mitford wrote on the antiquities of Egypt, not a great interest of hers, with the following added comment:

> In taking on the Egyptian caper, I realized that I was violating two of my cardinal self-imposed rules about writing: never embark on a project unless you are deeply fascinated by it, and absorb all available information about your subject before approaching the target of the investigation. (pp. 271-272)

The American Way of Birth

The 1980s coincided with Jessica Mitford's temporary hiatus from muckraking. For an article titled "The mellowing of veteran muckraker Jessica Mitford," she told the interviewer she did not plan another muckraking book. Instead she would finish her current project, a memoir, and hope "to be remembered as a kind old soul who scribbles occasionally" (Dean, 1982, p. 1).

But she started up again, eventually publishing her latest muckraking tome, *The American Way of Birth* (1992). The 300-page book had its genesis in the personal story of a lay midwife, the daughter of some old friends, who

"found herself the subject of investigation by the California Board of Medical Quality Assurance with a view to possible criminal prosecution for allegedly practicing medicine without a license" (pp. 8-9). Her interest piqued, Mitford spent three years on the book, in which she criticized the American medical system's fixation with modern childbirth accoutrements and practices, from frequent cesarean section deliveries to such technological paraphernalia as the electronic fetal monitor. Backed by ample statistics, she condemned the enormous role of money, politics, and malpractice threat in today's realm of national health care in general and childbirth in particular.

The book displayed a serious tone, but Mitford injected her own presence throughout the text, occasionally reverting to her trademark repartee (Mitford, 1992):

> One theme that reverberates throughout the literature of midwives is *bonding*, a subject that fills me with uneasiness. . . . The infant, as soon as delivered, should be put right on the mother's breast for instant bonding. To me, that all sounds like a bit of claptrap. . . . Whatever is meant by "bonding" (epoxy comes to mind), it seems obvious that those first allegedly precious moments have very little to do with the eventual relationship of mother and child. . . . That said—and I did have to get it off my chest at some point—my tour of the American midwifery scene was most illuminating. (pp. 170-171)

Although it has not approached the impact of *The American Way of Death*, the new book received many reviews and a respectable response. Sorel (1993) wrote: "It is not revolutionary in the way her *The American Way of Death* was some 30 years ago but it is a challenging and fascinating exploration of a growing national problem" (p. 80). Sorel criticized Mitford's

"offhanded" treatment of the role of fathers in the childbirth process, but added "all in all, though, this is a fine book" (p. 81).

Another reviewer wrote: "[Mitford] is helped stylistically (although somewhat hurt substantively) by the fact that she began her research for the book in a state of utter ignorance," without knowing the meaning of *episiotomy*, for example (Kastor, 1992, p. C9).

Shorter (1992) gave grudging praise in the *New York Times Book Review*: "Although one can feel, in the sadness and desperation of the many women [Mitford] interviewed, how quickly the American obstetrics system is approaching a crisis, readers will be disappointed if they take her book for more than it is—the story of her enthusiastic trek through alternative methods of birth in America" (p. 22).

Mitford's childbirth investigations seem to have suffered in impact from the fact that there existed a substantial body of previous work on the subject and that there were many knowledgeable professionals ready to cast a critical eye on her book. "Given the explosion of literature on childbirth in the last 20 years, this subject does not cry out for the muckraking, dramatic exposé that is Mitford's stock-in-trade," wrote Leavitt (1992, p. 40). "Mitford does not seem familiar with much of the recent writing." Leavitt praised other aspects of the book, saying Mitford hits her stride on the issue of the need for midwives in the medical establishment and the larger issue of the need for national health insurance.

In spite of the nine books and many dozens of articles, little of a scholarly nature has been written of Jessica Mitford's contributions as a journalist. Although a few scholarly articles exist on the modern muckrakers

(e.g., Stein, 1975), it appears that Mitford and other contemporary muckraking authors have not yet been studied at length by their academic counterparts. Much material is available on the Progressive-era muckrakers, both as journalists and as narrators of social history; maybe that will someday be true of today's reform-minded journalists as well.

Chapter V

Jessica Mitford's Career Roles

Jessica Mitford's has played many career roles, and she developed as a journalist while also developing as an activist, a chronicler, a lecturer, and a humorist. As noted earlier, two broad concepts repeatedly presented themselves as those by which Mitford survives and flourishes: contrast and irreverence. These notions surfaced both in Mitford's own writing and in assessments made by others of all her career roles.

Journalist

Jessica Mitford's first husband, Esmond Romilly, was a journalist, and he often encouraged her to get some training to become one as well: "Esmond was all for that. He sort of said, oh, do get on with it. You could certainly learn to do it. But I never did" (Mitford, taped interview, November 1, 1994).

While she was casting about for gainful employment after his death in World War II, she was disappointed to learn that Columbia University's journalism school was not located in the District of Columbia, where she lived, and that one could not enroll without an undergraduate degree. As she had had only home schooling, she went to secretarial school instead (Mitford, 1977). Asked whether her motive at the time was to carry on the political work of her husband through journalism, she replied: "Yeah, very much so. Absolutely" (taped interview, November 1, 1994).

In a psychological study of Mitford at mid-life, Fursland (1990) named "journalist" as Mitford's lifelong occupational dream:

> Esmond [Romilly] died when Jessica was 24, before she formed her occupational Dream of becoming a journalist, but he had supported her idea of pursuing that career. Her inability to live out her occupational Dream in early adulthood may have been in part due to the loss of her mentor at this crucial point. One can speculate that had Esmond lived, Jessica may have found a place for her occupational Dream in her early adult life structure. (p. 198)

Still, Mitford said recently that she never thought at the time of pressing her contacts at the Washington *Post*, where she and Romilly had published a series of articles called "Baby Bluebloods in Hobohemia" in 1940. Mitford now says Romilly did most or all of the writing of the articles himself. He was the leader in such things, and she considered herself unskilled and unprepared for such a career as journalist (taped interview, November 1, 1994).

Mitford's failure to use her network of friends and acquaintances to gain access to the world of journalism was in some ways odd. To be sure, as mentioned in her later writings and those of others, she was being exposed repeatedly to some of the major social and political figures of the day. In addition to knowing the *Post* editor, Eugene Meyer, and the editor of the *New Republic*, Michael Straight, she was friends with Seldon Rodman, who put out the small magazine *Common Sense* (Mitford, 1960).

Also, Mitford was meeting important people while staying with Clifford and Virginia Durr, who had moved from Alabama so Clifford Durr could join Franklin Roosevelt's New Deal administration as legal counsel for the Reconstruction Finance Corporation. Lyndon Johnson, then a freshman member of Congress, visited the Durrs' home in Virginia, as did Senator

Claude Pepper. Virginia Durr's sister Josephine was married to Justice Hugo Black (Mitford, 1977).

But Mitford apparently had not then developed the confidence and ability for self-promotion that she would later exhibit. And as a widow, she faced the very practical task of earning a living for herself and her young daughter. Indeed it would have been difficult for anyone to engage in serious career planning or what is now called networking so soon after the sudden death of a spouse. "I didn't see myself as a writer *at all*" she recalled recently (taped interview, November 1, 1994).

Yet the draw of journalism was to surface again and again over the years. When Mitford finally had her writing published for the first time in 1956, in *Lifeitselfmanship*, the self-published pamphlet on how to use left-wing lingo (reprinted in Mitford, 1977), she expressed delight at seeing her name in print and at the thought of all those readers attending to her words. "How I reveled in those fan letters! My days were taken up answering them, my evenings in the endless job of collating and stapling new editions to meet the ever-burgeoning demand" (Mitford, 1977, p. 271).

In addition, Mitford strongly identified herself with the world of journalism in the years before she became a practicing journalist. While a member of the Communist Party, for example, as she later wrote, she "should have loved to be a reporter on the PW [*People's World*], and once confided this ambition to the county leadership, but they pointed out that I had no experience as a journalist" (Mitford, 1977, p. 294).

In a televised interview broadcast in the San Francisco Bay Area in the seventies, Mitford was asked if she wrote for the purpose of exposure and

impact on society or as a means of self-expression. "Well," she replied, "I think the former is more true . . . I'm just a sort of mucky old journalist" (KQED, "Turnabout," 1978).

Jessica Mitford's ideas on journalism have emphasized the thorough investigation of the matter at hand and the conveying of an individual point of view. These ideas appear to mesh somewhat with the ideas of investigative-type reporters from earlier eras of American history.

While Nellie Bly's "stunt" journalism of the 1880s may have been a bit more extreme than Mitford's reporting style, Mitford appears to relish the retelling of such adventure. In the back-cover blurb of a recent Bly biography (Kroeger, 1994), Mitford wrote: "A thrilling mystery story, this magnificently achieved portrait of an extraordinary woman clearly belongs on the bookshelf of every journalist and journalism school."

Mitford's ideas on journalism do appear to coincide with the notions of participation (so prevalent in 1890s yellow journalism) and reform (so prevalent among the Progressive-era muckrakers). A true connection to yellow journalism is difficult to make, since the reporters identified with that movement were so involved in attending and even creating the events they covered. Although there may have been more to yellow journalism than sensationalism (Milton, 1989), it was distinctly an editor and publisher-led movement. Thus there is little to relate yellow journalism to Mitford's writing.

Naturally, there is much more said and written about whether Jessica Mitford is a muckraker. As noted earlier, this "queen of muckrakers" shares

the experience of a privileged upbringing with several of the Progressive-era muckrakers whose work was prominent between about 1902 and 1912.

She also can be said to share the activist goals of Progressive-era reform journalists, as evidenced in her own comments and those of others. Speaking of her research for *The Trial of Dr. Spock,* Mitford said: "My objectives as a journalist in covering the whole trial was to expose the government's role in prosecuting these people for what was, in my view, their inalienable right to advocate" (Evans, et al., 1986).

Journalism professor Carl Jensen of Sonoma State University, an avowed Mitford fan who has invited her several times over the last 10 years to speak in his classes, said:

> In brief, a muckraker is an honest, professional journalist who rocks the boat; shakes things up; challenges the status quo; creates positive social change. Jessica is definitely a muckraker. I can think of no contemporary journalist who better meets my muckraker definition. Günter Wallraff, the German journalist, is the only other one I would say is a true muckraker today. Jessica's wit sets her apart from Wallraff and any muckraker wannabes. (personal communication, February 23, 1995)

Ben H. Bagdikian, dean emeritus of the graduate journalism school at the University of California, Berkeley, also was asked if Mitford is a muckraker:

> When she did the stuff on the [Famous] Writers [School] and on the funeral parlors, she was. She did her research very well, and she knew what she was looking for. A muckraker is looking for not only the whole field, which she can do—she's intellectually competent —but at those telling incidents . . . which tend to . . . personify the larger problem. She's very good at that. (taped interview, May 19, 1994)

Bagdikian added that he does not think Mitford's forte is detailed investigation, not for lack of acumen, but because her greater strength is in elevating the need for muckraking, in inspiring others to take it up.

Mitford has a basic familiarity with the muckraking journalists of the Progressive era, but she claims not to have thought much about her relation to them. Her recent thoughts on being called a muckraker were brief: "Well, needless to say, I exploit [the muckraker title] for all it's worth," she said (taped interview, December 4, 1994), declining to specify whether she really views herself as a muckraker. Fursland (1990) noted that Mitford suggested to the publisher of *A Fine Old Conflict* that a reference be added to the book's cover notes: "Did you know that *Time* magazine once called me 'Queen of the Muckrakers'? Might be worth throwing in" (p. 185).

Mitford's longtime editor on several of her books, Robert Gottlieb, took the comparison of Mitford to the muckrakers a step farther when consulted for a documentary film. "Yes, she's a muckraker, but she's more than that. She's in her own category." He added that she "stretches journalistic ethics" (Evans, et al., 1986). As to what exactly that stretch might be, Gottlieb did not say at the time, and attempts to ask him during this research were not successful. Gottlieb clearly is a supporter of Mitford's brand of ethics, judging from his remarks in the documentary and his years of work with her on such controversial books as *The American Way of Death.*

Mitford's methods have indeed been viewed as controversial by many, perhaps in part because she sets them forth so boldly and without apology (e.g., advising would-be investigators to order their interview questions from

"kind to cruel" in Mitford, 1979). Yet even the most controversial of her work has never been challenged in court. In her daughter's view:

> I suppose some people would say she's controversial. She uses that nice-nasty approach. She comes in with this nice face, and these fading blue-green watery eyes, and a very educated voice and manner. And she starts off all nice and friendly and gets them all comfortable. And then she just slips in these questions and gets the most amazing answers, and the people she's interviewing just sound so ridiculous. . . . To some people, that's controversial; to me, that's journalism. (Constancia Romilly, personal communication, April 9, 1995)

Mitford has been repeatedly and consistently clear on one ethical matter, that of getting quotes and facts right. She has said her personal guideline is "never to falsify the facts of the thing—never to falsify what someone's told you" (Evans, et al., 1986).

Mitford's close friend, Marge Frantz, confirmed Mitford's resolve and ability to quote accurately:

> Decca is a superb writer, with remarkable eyes and ears. I went with her to various interviews [for *Kind and Usual Punishment*]. It was uncanny the way she could recreate conversations. . . . She is very, very sharp. She quoted selectively, of course, but everyone does that. You have to. (personal communication, February 25, 1995)

Asked years ago if any of her interview subjects had flatly denied they said certain things, Mitford replied: "No. Literally never. . . . I try to be extremely careful. I bend over backwards not to exaggerate things people say" (P. Jensen, 1974).

In fact, Mitford had hoped someone would challenge her research on *The American Way of Death*:

> Forest Lawn [cemetery] sent a round-robin letter to all clergymen in the Los Angeles area . . . ending with a postscript: "Incidentally, legal counsel for Forest Lawn is preparing libel suits against the authoress and her publishers." (I *craved* that libel suit, and should have taken great pleasure in defending against it, but alas, it never materialized.) (Mitford, 1977, p. 315)

Mitford has displayed some controversial views on subjects near and dear to the hearts of traditionally trained journalists. The issue of objectivity in reporting has drawn her ire many times. "I don't know what objective is, you see. That's my trouble," she has said (P. Jensen, 1974). "I'm not terribly in favor of balance," she remarked in a documentary film (Evans, et al., 1986).

This disdain for objectivity for its own sake sets Mitford apart in a way from the ideal of many other contemporary journalists, particularly those trained in the nation's journalism schools to use the objectivity of science as their model for reporting. As Altschull wrote (1990):

> That idea, that journalists ought not to be advocates of any causes other than the Cause of America or the Cause of Democracy remains deeply embedded in the belief system of America's reporters, despite the popularity of investigative journalism. So powerfully is this idea held that it is expressed even by a historian relating the story of Joseph McCarthy . . . [who said] the press erred not in practicing objectivity but rather in failing to provide enough *information* so that McCarthy's lies [in ruining careers over charges of Communism] might be exposed. (p. 315)

An argument can be made that Mitford's self-taught style of investigating and reporting without undue attention to objectivity is more closely allied with advocacy journalism than with investigative reporting or any of the other types. The advocacy movement was described by Altschull (1990) as follows:

> The journalist is here a frank spokesperson for a cause. He or she picks and chooses among the available source material in search of weapons to help the cause. Objectivity in this situation is considered offensive and wicked. The advocacy journalist is in fact an editorialist operating on the "news" pages. (pp. 317-318)

Mitford's devotion to causes is well known, and her writing style has nearly always included her subjective voice. Although she openly identified her own opinions in her writing, she developed the habit of including them far more often than the typical journalist of today, even one whose goals include exposing societal ills or promoting a point of view. And since Mitford's writing style would lose its effectiveness were her subjective voice to be left out, she perhaps would not choose to write without expressing some personal point of view.

An important point of this study, then, is that Mitford's strong identification in the minds of many as an investigative journalist, and a muckraker seeking to expose the vagaries of major institutions rather than individuals, appears generally accurate. She clearly has enjoyed the investigations themselves and the thrill of the chase. But perhaps an even more fitting description for her is that of advocacy journalist, in that her writing itself displays such a strong viewpoint, usually for a cause of great personal importance. It would be difficult to accuse Mitford of merely reporting, no matter how compelling the material. Rather, her style is to use her interest in offbeat aspects of American society as an entry point for expounding her views on major social themes and institutions, such as the First Amendment. That she does so with irreverence and detachment makes

for a curious reputation, one not always fully cognizant of how hard she has worked to communicate the results of her investigations effectively.

The widely respected investigative reporter Carl Bernstein, for example, writing high praise in the afterword of *Poison Penmanship,* emphasized Mitford's rank of amateur: "Jessica Mitford's feats seemed all the more impressive because of her amateur status; indeed her work might be regarded as the triumph of the amateur" (p. 276).

Mitford has no quarrel with having been labeled an accomplished amateur: "I thought that was very nice, indeed. In other words, he was pointing out that I hadn't really got much background for writing, especially writing for magazines" (taped interview, February 19, 1995). In Mitford's characteristic style, this self-assessment was brief and non-defensive.

The casual reader of Mitford's works gets no hint that she wishes to be taken more seriously than an amateur. She has been consistently modest, if humorous, in her self-appraisals, both in her own writings and in published interviews. She often remarked that she had no formal education, that she knew nothing about writing but did not know what else to do, or that she had approached an early project all wrong (e.g., Mitford, 1979). But Mitford's body of work is substantial, and she takes professional pride and personal pleasure in its impact over the years (Mitford, 1979; Mitford, taped interviews, 1994 & 1995).

In summarizing the written record of Mitford's journalism and the various responses to it, it is important to revisit the subject of Mitford's upbringing. Although she chose to dodge her high-class beginnings and live among regular people, she retained ways that can only be associated with

privilege. She said and did whatever she liked without taking anything too seriously—on some level she did not have to. She may have set out to write in the same way she set out to tend bar or sell dresses during her first months in the United States, fully expecting to succeed eventually and to have fine adventures along the way. Indeed, she had many difficulties publishing her early works, such as *The American Way of Death*, the contents of which she was unwilling to change (Mitford, 1979). But unlike her fellow journalists, past and present, she never had to rely on her writing for her livelihood.

Activist

Mitford's activism has been a lifelong interest and pursuit. She has worked for change in many arenas of American life since the forties, and she maintains an untiring interest in political and social issues. Much of the activism of Mitford's young adulthood is told in detail in her book *A Fine Old Conflict*, including the portion of her life that centered around activities of the Communist Party.

Although she did not think of herself particularly as a working mother with a career in the early years, she did think of herself as having a life's work in such organizations as the Civil Rights Congress, of which she was executive secretary until it disbanded in 1956, and the Communist Party (Mitford, 1977; Fursland, 1990; Constancia Romilly, personal communication, April 9, 1995). As Mitford said of a typical day in 1953 (in Fursland, 1990):

> At the office at CRC shortly before 8 a.m. and dash home for a brief look at the children and some dinner, then dash out to a meeting and be there forever . . . it was the most full-time thing. (p. 151)

One thing that seemingly set Mitford and her husband apart from some of their contemporaries during the Red-baiting years of the McCarthy era is that they did not particularly try to hide their activities. This stance of open and above-board activism served them well when the times got tough. Asked recently how their experiences of that era differed from those of blacklisted friends, Mitford replied that Treuhaft's reputation flourished as his history of defending blacks increased, leaving him with more work than ever, rather than less. She also addressed the issue of openness:

> I was never in the least bit sort of undergroundish. I mean, I was always in these subversive organizations [such as the Communist Party] publicly. And so therefore we didn't suffer, but I'll tell you who suffered . . . the unsung ones would be librarians, teachers, rank-and-file trade unionists, and people who didn't have the clout or money or anything like the Hollywood Ten [prominent film-industry artists who were blacklisted] . . . and whose careers were absolutely shot to hell. (taped interview, December 4, 1994)

Mitford's other interests over the years have been many, and often they have dovetailed with her writing projects: reform of the funeral industry and the prison system, left politics, ending apartheid in South Africa, and abortion rights. Recent interests have included reform of the health care system and promotion of a single payer health plan, fighting the ban on travel to Cuba, and an anti-censorship stance on pornography.

Fursland (1990) made an interesting interpretation of Mitford's great passion about social issues. Reviewing another researcher's idea that in general women's integrity centers on an ethic of care, she wrote:

> Although Jessica's life involved an ethic of care, this caring was for society at large, rather than in terms of personal connections. Although her two marriages were important to her, she did not seem

> to rely on a sense of connection, or judge her worth on activities of individual care. (p. 245)

Although such a personal assessment is beyond the scope of this study, it can easily be confirmed that Mitford has cared deeply about civil rights and social justice. And because she appears not to have separated her various career roles, she was very often the activist, even when she was also the journalist or the lecturer, the parent or the friend.

Nevertheless, a broad look at Mitford's work reveals the impression that her themes as a writer are less political than her themes as an activist. Mitford herself has often maintained that she just fell into her writing topics, rather than choosing them based on some criteria. Her daughter, Constancia Romilly, was even more explicit:

> Her topics just come up from whatever she comes across. It's because of her own rather peculiar sense of what's interesting and hasn't been done before. . . . She's always looking for something unusual. Her interest in the First Amendment really grew out of her own experiences, being fingerprinted and the loyalty oath and all that. It's not like she looks around and says, "What are the burning issues of the day?" She just falls into topics because she finds them interesting. (personal communication, April 9, 1995)

Mitford's books confirm that many of her topics just come her way and that several of them have come to her via her husband's law experiences, such as *The American Way of Death* and the article on the Famous Writers School (Mitford, 1963; Mitford, 1979). Yet clearly Mitford has used her interest in unusual and sometimes offbeat topics as a gateway for communicating ideas about larger issues. Thus, her activism often is an integral part of her journalism, and vice versa.

Chronicler

In spite of the autobiographies, much of the personal side of Jessica Mitford has remained hidden. Fursland (1990) described what she called Mitford's lack of introspection, but suggested that introspection was what led to the writing of the first volume of autobiography, *Daughters and Rebels* : "Introspection was incompatible with her personality style, but faced with her homeland and her family, and at 38 faced with the onset of mid-life, she was no longer able to engage in minimal reflection" (p. 215). That trip home to England in 1955 was Mitford's first visit there in 19 years.

When Jessica Mitford completed that first book, *Daughters and Rebels,* the manuscript was turned down by many major publishers. While in England, Mitford found a British publisher who helped arrange simultaneous publication in the United States, and the book came out in 1960 (Mitford, 1977). Although the book is an account of her personal and political estrangement from her family, not the exposé that would later bring the muckraker title, a surprising number of people consider it her best book. Her husband, Robert Treuhaft, said:

> She started out, really, trying to put something together from the letters of [her first husband] Esmond Romilly. I think she was somewhat inhibited in doing that. It was too close a question for her, too subjective and too emotional for her. Again, it's part of her style not to display emotion. But it did turn into what I think is her best book, and that's *Daughters and Rebels*. . . . I still think that it's a great book and certainly established her ability to write. And although she didn't explore deeply her personal feelings, she was able, in a lighthearted way, to discuss serious things. (taped interview, February 22, 1995)

Daughters and Rebels sold more widely in England than in the United States, although it did fairly well here, too. "In fact, for a very, very brief moment, it was at the bottom of the New York *Times* bestseller list," Mitford recalled (taped interview, December 4, 1994).

Asked how she felt upon publishing that first book, Mitford said: "It's an achievement, an accomplishment . . . and especially when people like Philip Toynbee praised it, people outside the family. . . . Then when it began to get proper reviews and all, I found that very thrilling" (taped interview, December 4, 1994). Mitford added that, even now, people occasionally ask her to sign old copies of the book, which she called "very pleasing."

Mitford's daughter, Constancia Romilly, said: "My favorites [among her books] are the autobiographies, because they're very personal. . . . She's been through and personally affected by some of the biggest events of the 20th century" (personal communication, April 9, 1995).

Mitford's talent for chronicling her own life and infusing her story with major historical themes was echoed by Marge Frantz, who was asked whether Mitford had held back on anything significant about the Communist Party years in writing the second volume of her autobiography:

> I think *A Fine Old Conflict* is pretty honest. It did a good job of telling about the [Communist] Party, and it made [the Party] human. . . . It comes across that she ended up feeling it was a very good experience. She doesn't harp on the Party's mistakes. It's a great piece of satire, but it's loving satire. (personal communication, February 25, 1995)

Carl Bernstein, whose book *Loyalties* (1989) explored the Communist Party experiences that unfolded as he was growing up, wrote of discussing *A*

Fine Old Conflict with his father, a longtime friend of Mitford who took a different view of her account:

> I cited the success of Decca's book as evidence of a new attitude: a willingness to pay attention to what these [Communist Party] people had to say. But in the last analysis, my father pointed out, Decca's book is really about why she *left* the Party. In fact, the book trivializes the whole experience of having been in the Party, reducing it to almost farcical anecdote. (p. 76)

Those who know her well have insisted that Mitford is indeed a reflective person, but that it is rare for her to discuss highly personal matters openly. Virginia Durr, with whom Mitford lived at the time of Esmond Romilly's death, said in an oral history interview:

> Decca makes a joke of everything, and she can be terribly arrogant and upper class and just freeze the marrow of people's bones when she wants to. But she really is a very feeling person and terribly emotional. She keeps it under very tight control, I must say. I suppose I am one of the few people who has ever seen Decca with all her defenses down. (Durr, 1985, p. 141)

Reasons given by others for Mitford's reticence in personal matters include her English upbringing and her stunning personal losses, which have included the untimely deaths of her first husband and two of her four children—a daughter in infancy (Mitford, 1960) and a son at age 10 (Fursland, 1990).

Said her daughter:

> That's how she deals with [a difficult personal matter], by writing about it more lightly, rather than wallowing in it. She's not a wallower. There's also a question of exposing yourself in public. We were raised very much with a kind of stiff-upper-lip tradition. (Constancia Romilly, personal communication, April 9, 1995)

Marge Frantz went beyond these explanations to offer one possible reason for Mitford's reticence that does not appear to have been addressed elsewhere:

> I think there was something in the experience of being in the Communist Party that puts people in the denial mode. I know I still have to fight it. There was just something about that experience—we were denying what was going on in the Soviet Union. And eventually, after we did leave the Party . . . I think some of that denial has stayed with us. (personal communication, February 25, 1995)

Mitford's own favorite of her books, she said, is *Faces of Philip: A Memoir of Philip Toynbee* (1984): "It didn't sell or anything like that, but it was fun doing it, and it was done for the survivors, the people that knew him" (taped interview, February 22, 1995).

As she relates in the first chapter of the book, she and Toynbee had a running joke about writing each other's obituaries. Her last laugh was bittersweet, as Toynbee died in 1981. But he did indeed write a brief profile of her, called "the most reflective thing I've ever seen on her" by Marge Frantz (personal communication, February 25, 1995). Mitford used excerpts from it in her book on Toynbee, but she steered clear of some of its most telling language, quoted here from a photocopy of his original typed manuscript:

> Decca, on the other hand, has a strong element of genuine and unabashed frivolity in her nature. Whenever confronted by any emotion which threatens to become deep—or turgid, as she would feel—she dances away from it in a sort of panicky jitter of comical derision. Since she is the only genuine female clown that I know—not just a wit but a total comic performer—her company is always exhilarating; occasionally exasperating. On certain occasions when I have begun to speak with great intensity about some issue which is

> dear to me but alien to Decca she has suddenly pushed my elbow sharply upwards so that my arm has been raised high above my head as if haranguing a multitude. . . . The weapon she adopts in most of her muckraking books and articles is precisely that sharp but clownish ridicule with which she regards such enterprises as our Gloucestershire [agricultural] commune and such attitudes as my own growing concern with religious belief and Christian practice. When I read *The American Way of Death*—still her most famous book—there were even moments when I felt a touch of sympathy for those disgraceful "morticians" as they came under a lash which I have sometimes felt curl—though lightly, for an old friend—around my own shoulders.

Lecturer

When *Daughters and Rebels* began to bring Jessica Mitford a measure of fame and notoriety in 1960, she embarked on a lecturing and teaching career that continues until today. Although she has always prepared for such obligations carefully, taken them seriously, and enjoyed them thoroughly, she never hesitated to use these forums as her personal soapbox. Thus she continuously combined her various roles of writer, journalist, lecturer, social activist, and gadfly in a way that many people admired (both supporters and detractors) but few could duplicate.

> An unforeseen by-product of the book [*Daughters and Rebels*] was the instant respectability its publication in America seemed to have conferred on me. Suddenly I was in demand for press interviews, radio and television appearances, as speaker at women's clubs and colleges—hardly forums to which I could have aspired formerly. The intention of my hosts was, I suppose, that I should provide fascinating glimpses into the life of the English aristocracy; instead, I used these occasions to blast away at all our old enemies—the FBI, HUAC, the district attorney of Alameda County. I soon discovered that as a published author one could get away with almost anything. (Mitford, 1977, p. 295)

Mitford's public speaking abilities, of which she was not confident at first, developed further after publication of *The American Way of Death* in 1963. Her life changed rapidly:

> I began making a lot of money lecturing and going to universities, and so on. I developed what Bob [Treuhaft] calls "the speech." You remember Ronald Reagan and "the speech". . . . The whole idea is the more jokes you can have, the better. And of course the funeral industry is full of larks, so that makes it nice. (Mitford, taped interview, December 4, 1994)

Treuhaft described the personal changes brought about by his wife's success:

> The success of *The American Way of Death* caused quite a change. It caused her to recognize that she had something to say. And although it was written to some extent jointly, at the beginning it was considered somewhat cute that a woman, and an Englishwoman, should have written about this subject. . . . She worked very hard at . . . being able to express herself publicly without any inhibitions. She always wrote out her things she was going to speak on—she still does. (taped interview, February 22, 1995)

Mitford was offered short-term teaching jobs at San Jose State University and later at Yale University in the seventies. Although she joked about her lack of qualifications, she seemed delighted to accept. Treuhaft (taped interview, February 22, 1995) emphasized her lengthy preparation, saying she was "passionately interested in doing things well, giving full value to the students."

That Mitford loves teaching was not hard to confirm: "My first lecture [at San Jose State]—at last I've found my true vocation! There were over two

hundred students, ranging from fresh-faced late teens to grizzled heads; I loved them on sight" (Mitford, 1979, p. 197).

As Mitford later wrote in an article for the *Atlantic*, her first teaching experience was far from mundane. "My Short and Happy Life as a Distinguished Professor" (reprinted in Mitford, 1979, p. 192) chronicled Mitford's experiences as a visiting professor of sociology at San Jose State University in the fall of 1973. She was hired to teach a lecture course, "The American Way," and an honors seminar, "Techniques of Muckraking." This guest professor, who gaily described her own academic background as "nil," (p. 193) had only three years before been listed along with some 65 others by the House Internal Security Committee as an "undesirable radical campus speaker" (p. 194). [In November 1993 Congress passed the Friendship Act, which repealed sections of the Internal Security Act of 1950 referring to "worldwide communist conspiracy" and other Cold War relics ("It's V-C Day!" 1993).]

After the teaching contract was signed but before the semester began, Mitford received written notice that she was to sign a loyalty oath and be fingerprinted at the personnel office. Ignoring the notice, she began teaching with great enthusiasm, but as the semester wore on, she found herself in the midst of a fracas with the administration. She eventually signed the loyalty oath under protest, but only much later compromised to give her sealed fingerprints to the court rather than the university (Mitford, 1979).

The student newspaper, the *Spartan Daily*, followed the situation closely, as evidenced in its headlines of October 1973 (partial list): "Mitford signs loyalty oath under protest" (October 4), "Mitford gambles job" (October

11), "Mitford taking case to Santa Clara court" (October 16), "Court bumps Mitford" (October 17), "Mitford will comply with fingerprint compromise" (October 19).

November and December brought more of the same: "[President] Bunzel won't pay Mitford" (November 14), "Court will discuss Mitford resolution" (November 29), and "University must pay Mitford" (December 3). Throughout the affair, Mitford's students and the student body at large appeared to champion her anti-establishment stance (Degnan, 1975), which happily coincided with a period of broad student activism unparalleled in American history.

Mitford's piece in the *Atlantic* made serious points about the affair in characteristically droll fashion (reprinted in Mitford, 1979):

> Well (said I to the deans), I think I have done my best to uphold and defend the Constitution of the United States against enemies, especially domestic ones like you; but the annotated Constitution of the State of California runs to three hefty volumes and covers all manner of subjects. Do I uphold and defend, for example, Article 4, Section 25 and three-fourths, limiting boxing and wrestling matches to 15 rounds? I don't know. Perhaps it should be 14, or 16? I do know that I cannot uphold and defend the recent amendment which reinstates the death penalty, since in my view it runs counter to the United States Constitution's prohibition against cruel and unusual punishment. Nor can I uphold and defend the section requiring the loyalty oath, which I regard as an abridgment of First Amendment rights. . . . You are requiring me to swear falsely as a condition of employment? (p. 200)

At the time of "The Great San Jose Finger Flap," as with many of her other run-ins, Mitford managed to make the opposition look ridiculous. One reporter described the school's administrators as "the pathetic San Jose State

officials . . . who must be mightily relieved now that they no longer have Jessica to kick them around" (reprinted in Degnan, 1994, p. 97).

Asked recently how she responded to charges of making bumbling but otherwise fairly benign administrators look stupid, Mitford replied: "Oh, dear. Well, that's because they *were* bumbling. I mean, I didn't intend to, but what can you do? They *were* stupid. It wasn't my fault" (taped interview, February 19, 1995).

As for the lasting import of the loyalty oath and fingerprinting controversy, Mitford recently expressed surprise that she won the case and that the university never appealed. She also was amazed that so many people used her position as a model for their own:

> After that, I would quite often get phone calls from people who were applying for jobs at state universities. And they'd say, "What do I do? They say I have to be fingerprinted. Do I have to be?" So all I could say was, well, I don't think so, but on the other hand, I don't want to advise you to refuse, because for you [teaching is] probably your profession, what you want to do in life. To me it was . . . only a three-month episode. . . . If you want to be . . . a professor and all that, I'd be the last person to tell you not to be fingerprinted. You'll never know that the reason they turned you down is because you refused." (taped interview, February 19, 1995)

As for Mitford's actual teaching experiences and practices, she is reported to have brought a certain egalitarian aspect to her teaching stemming from her own limited education. "In a way, she was learning along with her students and . . . didn't *ever* take a lofty position toward [them]. She was and is still very much one of them" (Treuhaft, taped interview, February 22, 1995).

A lecturing appointment at Yale University in 1976 afforded Mitford the opportunity to teach investigative journalism techniques through a writing class in the English department, "Muckraking and Investigative Journalism" (Fursland, 1990). There she had a smaller class and a much quieter existence.

Mitford's frequent use of hyperbole has made it difficult to assess her view of students. She was fond of suggesting that her students were turned loose to do as little or as much work as they cared. "Well, as I'd never done much grading, I sort of gave all the ones I liked an A, you know, in fact most of them" she said of her class at Yale (taped interview, May 7, 1994). And "Nobody can teach writing, actually, as you know. You either can [write] or you can't" (taped interview, February 19, 1995).

And what of Mitford's attraction as a speaker in the journalism schools? Carl Jensen of Sonoma State University has invited Mitford to visit "because she is a terrific speaker, a good friend, and she never fails to fill a classroom or lecture hall. I want my students to understand what journalistic ethics, honesty, and perseverance means; and they always get that from Jessica" (personal communication, February 23, 1995).

Bagdikian illuminated Mitford's appeal to audiences with this story:

> When I was a young reporter, I covered an appearance by Sophie Tucker, who was an old torch singer way back in the vaudevillian days. . . . I was with her backstage. . . . And in the wings she was this tired old lady, drooping, heavy makeup, and she was perspiring . . . and I thought, "Oh, this is going to be a disaster—it's painful." And then the band played and they said, "Now we bring you the great Sophie Tucker!" And as though someone had turned on a switch, she strode in there, and she projected, and she was full of energy. And I was on a panel once with Jessica. . . . And before we went on . . . she seemed to be

> at sixes and sevens. And the foolish thought strayed into my mind: poor Jessica. Then we got on the panel, and she was like Sophie Tucker. She was right there—stole everybody's attention right away, made irreverent remarks. She has that presence, and she uses it effectively. (taped interview, May 19, 1994)

Asked about her approach to guest lecturing and her preparation for it, Mitford was characteristically offhand: "I think you can talk about techniques and give them some amusing examples of things that have worked, and so on" (taped interview, February 22, 1995). Yet she confirmed Treuhaft's report that she prepares very carefully for her guest appearances and does not simply make it all up as she goes along, a point also stressed by her daughter (Constancia Romilly, personal communication, April 9, 1995).

Lecturing invitations have continued to come in for Mitford from universities and libraries, among others. On April 21, 1994, she participated in a panel discussion, "The American Way of Aging," at the University of California, Berkeley. ("*Older* is a circumlocution that makes me quite edgy—why not just say old?" she quipped.) After taking the audience on a romp through "the age mystique," Mitford repaired to her soapbox, where she took on President Clinton's health plan and made a pitch for the single payer plan that was then headed for the ballot in California (personal communication, April 21, 1994). Thus, her affiliation with the Communist Party may now be history, but she often promotes some manifestation of a socialist view.

A frequent Mitford lecturing topic of late is the controversial debate about pornography and free speech. She has held forth on this issue many times in the last few years, often revising and updating her notes. Videotaped at the San Francisco Public Library in November 1991, "Sex and the First

Amendment" is an impassioned stance against the censorship of pornography. Addressing the same issue in the introduction to the latest edition of *Censored: The News That Didn't Make the News and Why* (C. Jensen, 1994), Mitford sounded an ominous note about censorship. "If vigilance is the price of liberty, let's all keep an eye on the guys and dolls, ladies and gentlemen, boys and girls—take your pick—who are out to protect us from our own baser selves" (p. 15).

In addition to her own lecturing, Mitford has another place of sorts in American journalism education through the examples made of her writing. *Poison Penmanship* (Mitford, 1979) has been used by some educators as a text since its publication 15 years ago. "That was one of the hopes for it. I mean, it was written with that in mind, very much, the way it was organized" Mitford said (taped interview, February 19, 1995).

Carl Jensen of Sonoma State said he has made the book required reading in his classes, though he does not know many colleagues who do the same, adding that many journalism instructors adhere closely to the "five Ws" in their teaching (personal communication, February 23, 1995).

Samples of Mitford's writing (such as the embalming passages from *The American Way of Death*) and anecdotes about her interviewing techniques (such as her story of interviewing the Guiding Faculty of the Famous Writers School) also have appeared in many other college textbooks and popular writing guides (e.g., Brady, 1976; Mencher, 1977; Safire and Safir, 1992). Similarly, her colorful phrasing has turned up in many a book of quotations (e.g., Simpson, 1988).

In all, Mitford has fashioned an identifiable separate career as a lecturer and personality, counting teaching jobs, speaking engagements, and print and broadcast interviews and talk shows in the hundreds over the years. Although much of this activity relates to her work as a writer, the aspect of interaction with an audience can be described as a distinct and personally gratifying part of her career. For Mitford is a social being. As Marge Frantz said, "She hates to do things alone. She loves company, and she wants instant feedback" (personal communication, February 25, 1995).

It would also seem that Mitford's career as a speaker has been gratifying economically. Mitford's fees for lecturing were referred to as substantial by Marge Frantz: "She wants a fortune [to lecture]. She never charged me anything, but she usually charges a lot. . . . She's extremely adept at milking her fees to the max" (personal communication, February 25, 1995).

Asked how much she would charge for a single lecture, Mitford herself said something similar: "Absolutely the max if I have to do it—$2,000 [pause] or $2,500—better." Questioned about whether this is currently her usual fee, she replied that it is, adding that she takes less for some engagements (personal communication, March 31, 1995).

Clearly Mitford has been lauded formally by the academic world in real life if not in the academic literature, as with the visiting professorship at San Jose State University and later at Yale University (Mitford, 1979), an honorary degree from Smith College in 1976, appointment as scholar in residence at the Rockefeller Foundation's Bellagio Center in Italy in 1978, and a Distinguished Achievement Award given by the alumni association of the University of Southern California's Annenberg School of Communication (Dean, 1982).

Other honors Mitford has garnered include the Golden Gadfly award presented by Media Alliance in San Francisco in 1980 and a lifetime achievement award from the [San Francisco] Bay Area Book Reviewers Association in 1987.

Humorist

It almost goes without saying that one of the great keys to an understanding of Jessica Mitford and her work is wit—not just a sense of humor, though there is a great share of that—but wit: swift, scathing, irreverent, unapologetic, incomparable, relentless, fall-on-the-sword wit, and the more the better.

Mitford's printed and quoted words leave little doubt of the role wit plays in her work and her life. Some people who know her have confirmed this point heartily, some wearily, but they appear to agree that her wit is important and that it is often effective, both in the moment and in the long run.

Marge Frantz referred to Mitford's wit several times and emphasized the pragmatic side of it:

> She will sacrifice anything for a laugh. . . . but you can make a point with humor far more effectively than any other way. And if you're going to be a good organizer, you need to be incurably optimistic. You have to be able to keep going out there every day. (personal communication, February 25, 1995)

"She was a marvelous, wonderful organizer," another friend, Doris Walker, recalled (in Carroll, 1992). "Intelligent, hard-working and fun to be

with. But a terrible tease. She loves to bait people and sometimes can be mean. But I learned to bait her right back."

However, the *San Francisco Chronicle* noted: "One characteristic of her work has been its absence of the anger and self-righteousness found in so many reformers. 'People who declaim in an angry way are not too effective,' she said" (Carroll, 1992).

Mitford makes many serious points with her humor, but she also appears fond of displaying it purely for fun. On waiting for the return of her fingerprints after the legal challenge by San Jose State University, for example, she remarked to an interviewer: "Someday my prints will come" (P. Jensen, 1974, p. 20).

People interviewed for this study, as well as many other journalists who have written about Mitford, agreed that her humor has been very effective in her writing and speaking career. One book reviewer noted in *Esquire*: "As her many admirers know, [Mitford] is a past mistress of the neat skewer, the dry understatement, and the eliciting of utterly damning, freely offered quotes (her gifts in this area are positively magical)" (Pollitt, 1979).

Many people also agreed that the effects have lasted over time, that the serious message has survived the humorous presentation. Carl Jensen said:

> [She] writes with such wit and breathlessness that readers are captivated and so she is able to make these incredible charges and people understand the miscarriage of justice she represents . . . in a way that is lasting. One need only to look to her enormous and continuing impact on the funeral industry to see this. (personal communication, February 23, 1995)

Bagdikian, too, brought up Mitford's reliable use of humor in her work, whether written or spoken:

> She's a kind of crusader to produce irreverence. You bring her to a class, and she wants to sweep away all of the various arguments—this side, that side—she doesn't want to go through all of it. (taped interview, May 19, 1994)

Marge Frantz also described how Mitford's humor relates to personal issues, even painful ones, and not just the larger issues of society:

> The key to Decca is irreverence. There is absolutely *nothing* she is reverent about. I think that's sad, actually. I mean, she has serious values, but her humor is based on irreverence. . . . And the turn to humor is, in a way, avoiding [painful] issues. (personal communication, February 25, 1995)

This irreverent way of life surely relates to Mitford's particular upbringing and to her place near the end of a long line of sharp-tongued siblings. Once again, Nancy, the eldest of the Mitford children, led the way:

> Yet being [Nancy's] younger sister had its beneficial side in that it was an immensely toughening experience . . . one soon learned to give as good as one got, as techniques for teasing were perfected by sister after sister and passed on down the line . . . I found the habit hard to kick in later life. (Mitford, in Fursland, 1990, p. 99)

Guinness and Guinness (1985) offered some additional measure of explanation for the ups and down called "shrieks and floods" by the Mitford family: "Those who describe the Mitfords as affected or callous miss the point of this. It is not just frivolity; it is also a way of making life tolerable" (p. 13). Fursland (1990) added: "It appears that [the Mitfords] found it easier to express their feelings obliquely or in hyperbole" (p. 100).

Asked recently about these two quotes, Mitford turned both times to Nancy: "I don't think that's true of me so much. It's more true of Nancy" (taped interview, February 22, 1995). That answer, in its way, is typical. When the questions get too close, Mitford consistently and adroitly turns the subject to others rather than exploring her own feelings or actions. And for a dyed-in-the-wool Englishwoman, that may be perfectly appropriate.

Chapter VI

Career Impact and Legacy

> A review [of *The American Way of Death*] from England . . . began: "Miss Mitford is a minor curiosity of the age." I liked that, and mentioned it during the radio interview. Later, [the young man in charge of publicity on the book tour] drew me aside urgently: "We want to soft-pedal that aspect. You're *not* a minor curiosity; you're the author of the number-one best seller in the country. You're a major *authority*, whose opinion is sought by legislators and public agencies." I gazed at him down the decades that separated us, trying to see myself as he saw me. To him I'm Grand Old Miss Mitford, I thought, with not a hint of all the odd vicissitudes, contrasts, and surprises my life has afforded. (Mitford, 1977, pp. 306-307)

Jessica Mitford's career, like her life, has been one of many surprises. Although she ultimately established herself as a writer and journalist of note, there is almost no way to compare her experiences to those of others in her trade. These differences include her personal background, her independence from media organizations throughout her career, her happenstance way of selecting her major topics, her self-taught and sometimes controversial but highly effective methods of investigating her subjects, her strong advocacy for particular points of view, and the meshing of her various career roles of journalist, activist, lecturer, and so on. In short, her experiences in the world of journalism itself are quite unlike the experiences of others, even others who, like her, have sought and welcomed the title of muckraker.

The evidence of many interviews, articles, books, and broadcast works suggests that muckraker is an accurate and fitting title for Jessica Mitford. Although she is not tempted to dwell on whether she is a muckraker, many other journalists have suggested in varying degrees in interviews and articles

that the proverbial shoe fits (e.g., Dean, 1982; Kastor, 1992; Bagdikian, 1994; C. Jensen, personal communication, February 23, 1994; Kelley, 1994).

Several individuals have volunteered the view that the greatest lasting impact on society of Mitford's career relates to *The American Way of Death* and its effect on American funeral and burial practices. At this writing, Mitford is at work on a new edition of that book, to be released by the Alfred A. Knopf publishing house under the wing of the original editor, Robert Gottlieb. As such, Mitford says, she has resumed interviewing "the leftovers of the funeral industry" and chasing down statistics (taped interview, February 22, 1995).

Although her most recent book, *The American Way of Birth*, has sold well, including approximately 17,000 copies of the 1993 trade paperback edition (according to the publisher), those consulted agreed that Mitford's early works, both reformist and personal ones, were the strongest in terms of impact. *The American Way of Birth* received a few charges of style over substance from reviewers; some of those interviewed readily conceded that such may be the case (Mitford, taped interview, February 22, 1995; Frantz, personal communication, February 25, 1995).

Asked about the experience of researching and writing such an ambitious book as *The American Way of Birth* in her seventies, Mitford could think of no particular distinction from earlier experiences. As to whether her researching and interviewing techniques had changed over the years, she maintained they had not (taped interview, February 22, 1995).

Thus Mitford demonstrated again in recent interviews that she prefers not to dwell on herself or her motives. She hopes her students and audiences

will remember her techniques for investigating, interviewing, and compiling research into good prose, but she lives in the moment, by most accounts, not the past or the future (e.g., Kelley, 1994).

The impact of Mitford's career does have substance overall. Through her books and articles she has contributed to changes in public opinion and public policy relating to funerals, to medical experimentation on prisoners, and most recently, through the birth book, to the licensing of lay midwives in California (although she was not an instigator of the latter fight as she was of the first two). She has made her own best effort at social justice, both through the Communist Party years ago and through her many involvements since. Through her teaching and lecturing jobs, she has inspired many young people to take up investigative journalism and has shown them how to do it. She has been a role model for women when such role models were scarce (though she called herself "hopeless" as a feminist [taped interview, December 4, 1994], and her friend Marge Frantz agreed [personal communication, February 25, 1995]). Though her influence and recognition continue to fade a bit with time, she has made a distinct and lasting mark on American life.

Robert Treuhaft centered his recent assessment of the lasting impact of Mitford's work on her exposure of major social institutions: "Well, I think *The American Way of Death*, clearly, is number one, and the next one in terms of impact, would be the prison book" he said (taped interview, February 22, 1995).

Insights compiled from many sources add up to a picture of Mitford's career as one of many contrasts. That impression of contrast may even result

from Mitford's seeking of it. As she herself has noted, her life has been one of contrasts, great in number and in degree.

Mitford has often viewed and even experienced things in a highly black-and-white way: the upper-class English childhood versus the ferociously classless American adulthood; the despair of fascism versus the hope of communism; the cold chill of enemies versus the warm comfort of friends; the appearance of the witty, carefree, off-the-cuff speaker versus the reality of the meticulous—even perfectionist—writer; the complete lack of formal education ("nil") versus the Distinguished Professor; and finally, the expansive and open stance on societal matters contrasted with the intense protection of private ones.

Could it be that Mitford is fascinated with and thrives on contrasts, and on displaying them with clever words? Upon stopping to look carefully at her locutions, the reader notices her frequent use of phrases that embody high contrast in brief form, taking the practice beyond the usual English phrasing. In a recent BBC television program on the Americanization of the funeral industry in England, for example, Mitford was shown a deluxe casket. "It looks *frightfully comfortable,*" she said. "Is it?" (BBC, 1994, emphasis added). The juxtaposition of fright and comfort is classic Mitford.

On the subject of friends and enemies, Mitford holds forth often. She even coined the word *frenemies* (reprinted in Mitford, 1979) for those useful but disliked individuals that inevitably find their way into one's life. Although that view of enemies is certainly not unique, it is rarely expressed so clearly. Edward O. Wilson (1994) appeared to capture Mitford's views, if unknowingly, when he wrote:

> Without a trace of irony I can say I have been blessed with brilliant enemies. They made me suffer (after all, they were enemies), but I owe them a great debt, because they redoubled my energies and drove me in new directions. We need such people in our creative lives. (p. 218)

During the research for this thesis, Mitford expressed repeated concern that most of her enemies were dead and therefore could not be interviewed:

> Let's see, the funeral directors—who else? The famous writers are all dead, oh, dear! So sad. I hate it when enemies die. It really is wicked, you know. I mean, I mourn them as much as I do friends, because then they're no longer there to contend with. (taped interview, May 7, 1994)

Some enemies offered many years of fodder for Mitford's work. An incident in 1961 with John C. Houlihan, who was then the mayor of Oakland, is still a favorite Mitford anecdote. The San Francisco Bay Area Women for Peace had organized a one-day statewide lobbying extravaganza, with various groups slated to meet with different public officials. Mitford was assigned to meet with Mayor Houlihan, but he refused to see her group on grounds that she was a member of the Communist Party. She was vindicated when Houlihan was later tried, convicted, and sent to a state prison for bilking an aged widow of nearly $100,000. He spent two-and-a-half years in prison before being pardoned by Ronald Reagan, then the governor of California (Mitford, 1988a; Mitford, taped interview, November 1, 1994). "When my book about prisons came out, I had a letter from him, saying 'I'm very much in favor of prison reform.' People always are when they go in there" (Mitford, taped interview, November 1, 1994).

Keeping in mind Mitford's propensity for contrast, it is useful to review the varied things said and written about her by herself and others. What motivates her as a journalist, activist, chronicler, lecturer, humorist? What has guided her choices?

The answers that rise to the surface when the evidence is reviewed are complex, yet in the end simple. Mitford may be motivated by a true belief in and desire for social truth and justice; by inspiring others; by bringing down the guilty; by an instinct for survival in the face of adversity; and even by the desire to have fun, because the present is all there really is. Yet Mitford's answers to the why questions do not reveal much. She often responds to the "why" with some sort of return volley: "Why not?" she seems to say. Ben H. Bagdikian, the retired journalism dean at the University of California, Berkeley, put it this way:

> She doesn't have liberal guilt. . . . Most people who are inveterate reformers begin by saying "Well, now, I realize that there are differences of opinion." [Mitford] doesn't give anything to the opposition. She has a very clear social agenda and social values, so she's unapologetic about it. (taped interview, May 19, 1994)

Mitford's legacy to future generations can be left to them to decide. Her many lasting imprints—books, articles, films, and other broadcasts—will assure that the conversation about her continues. In addition, she has sold many of her voluminous personal papers, including original draft manuscripts of several books, to collections at the University of Texas at Austin and The Ohio State University. "Why give it away when you can sell it, as the madam used to say" (Mitford, personal communication, May 7,

1994). Clearly, her financial success on several fronts has set her apart from many another journalist as well.

One clue to her legacy that is available now, and that speaks volumes, is embodied in the quote she chose for the front material of *The Trial of Dr. Spock*. The quote, from Dr. Spock's famous baby book, goes like this: "Trust yourself. You know more than you think you do. . . . Don't take too seriously all that the neighbors say. Don't be overawed by what the experts say. Don't be afraid to trust your own common sense" (quoted in front matter of Mitford, 1969b).

These sentiments may represent Mitford's long, slow road to building her own career. Surely, she has leaned long and hard on the message that the people in power are nothing to fear, that one should think for oneself, and that hope can survive almost anything. Mitford seems first and foremost an activist in behalf of others, but one who can take care of herself in any storm. Mitford's critics—political, personal, professional—will rage on, at least she hopes they will.

Mitford's stature in the popular press appears unique. She has been portrayed in interviews throughout her career as a personality, not just the writer behind some book or article. Now that she has reached age 77, she is painted as a charming matriarch as well. Recent articles emphasized her walking cane, her sensible shoes, her twinkling blue eyes. Even now, few interviewers can resist mentioning her upbringing, the escapades of her unusual sisters, and *The American Way of Death*, all of which happened a long time ago (e.g. Carroll, 1992; Kelley, 1994).

It remains difficult to draw effective comparisons between Mitford and other contemporary journalists. She shares no particular background or experiences with others who have been called today's muckrakers, such as Ralph Nader or Jack Anderson. Unlike investigative reporters such as Carl Bernstein, she did not cut her teeth in the newsroom. She simply exposed societal ills in print for three decades and had great fun doing it.

Mitford's self-styled brand of advocacy journalism is both effective and enjoyable, but perhaps not completely compatible with the goal of objective reporting. Yet her rejection of objectivity does not compromise her meticulous research and painstaking writing. Mitford has earned the right to promote her own agenda by being very careful about facts and above-board about her opinions. If she turns out to be wrong about a person or an institution, or if she gets new information that changes her view, she is the first to correct herself, thereby often stealing pleasure from others who would like to correct her first.

Queen of muckrakers. It may be pure chance that this moniker came to symbolize Mitford's identity in the eyes of her reading and lecturing public. She is not really the leader of any identified group of journalists, but she is queen of her singular world and of whatever subject she takes up. Such constant identification with the muckrakers of old may have helped sustain her career through more than 35 years, giving shape to her eclectic array of topics and helping to set her apart from the crowd. But even without that title, even without the alliterative lure of Mitford the Muckraker, she is one authentic muckraker who can compete with any journalist in gathering

information and presenting it in a way that is lasting. The annals of American journalism will not soon forget this:

> I was in Denver, right after [*The American Way of Death*] had come out, and there was this undertaker I came across, a very sort of somber, ponderous fellow. We started talking funerals right away, and I know you can get very reasonable funerals, so I asked him, "How much would you charge to put *me* away?" He sort of sized me up and down and said, "Well, I could do it for $150." I said, "You're too late—a lot of people have offered to do it free as long as it's soon. (Mitford, in Kelley, 1994, p. 53; also related in Mitford, 1977)

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